US008061701B2

(12) **United States Patent**
Iguchi et al.

(10) **Patent No.: US 8,061,701 B2**
(45) **Date of Patent: Nov. 22, 2011**

(54) **SHEET FOLDING APPARATUS, IMAGE FORMING APPARATUS USING THE SAME, AND SHEET FOLDING METHOD**

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(73) Assignees: **Kabushiki Kaisha Toshiba**, Tokyo (JP); **Toshiba Tec Kabushiki Kaisha**, Tokyo (JP)

(*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this patent is extended or adjusted under 35 U.S.C. 154(b) by 253 days.

(21) Appl. No.: **12/366,467**

(22) Filed: **Feb. 5, 2009**

(65) **Prior Publication Data**

US 2009/0200724 A1 Aug. 13, 2009

Related U.S. Application Data

(60) Provisional application No. 61/027,138, filed on Feb. 8, 2008, provisional application No. 61/028,444, filed on Feb. 13, 2008.

(51) **Int. Cl.**
B65H 37/04 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **270/45**; 270/32; 270/37; 270/51; 270/58.07

(58) **Field of Classification Search** 270/32, 270/37, 45, 51, 58.07; 493/435, 445
See application file for complete search history.

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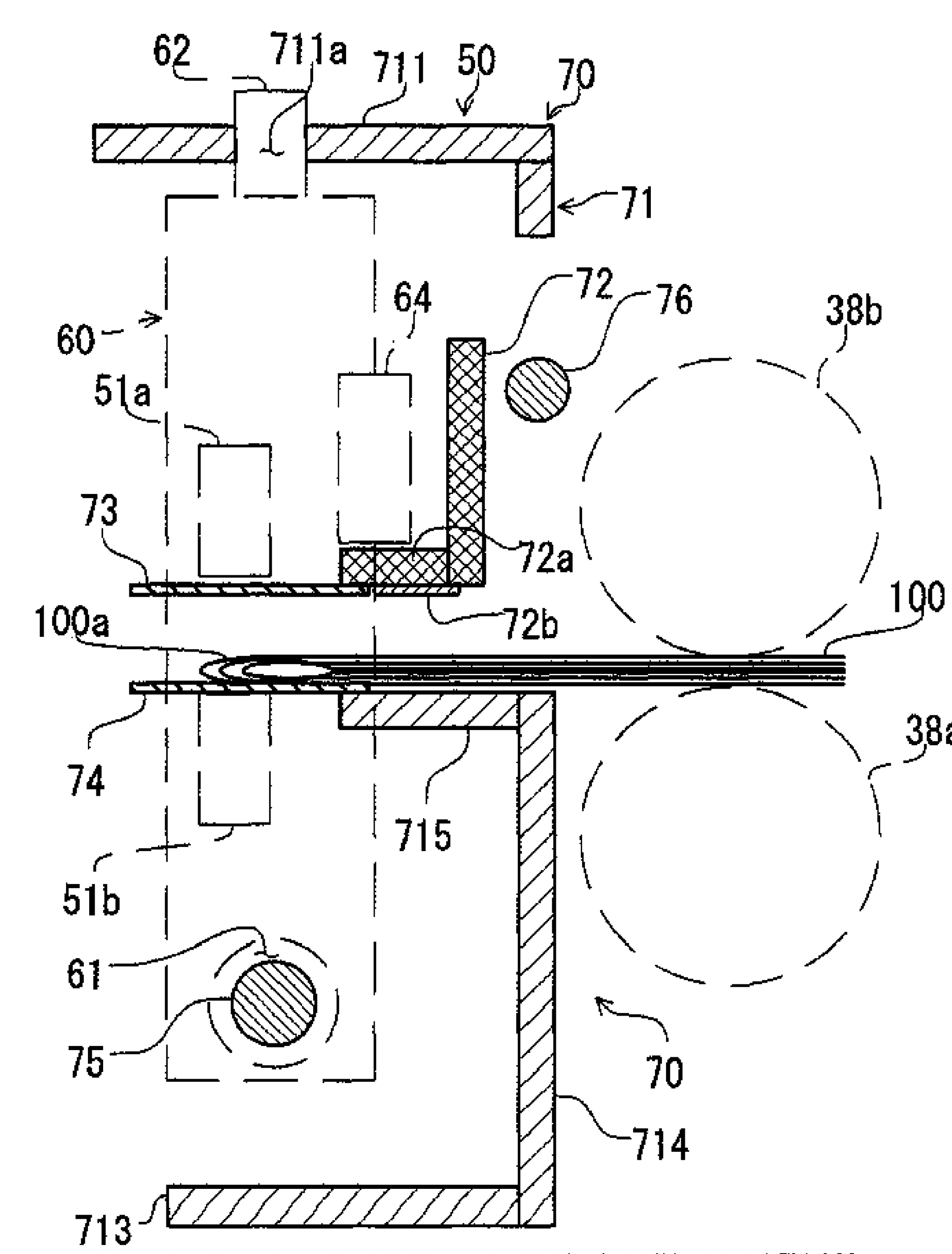
Primary Examiner — Leslie A Nicholson, III
(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm* — Patterson & Sheridan, LLP

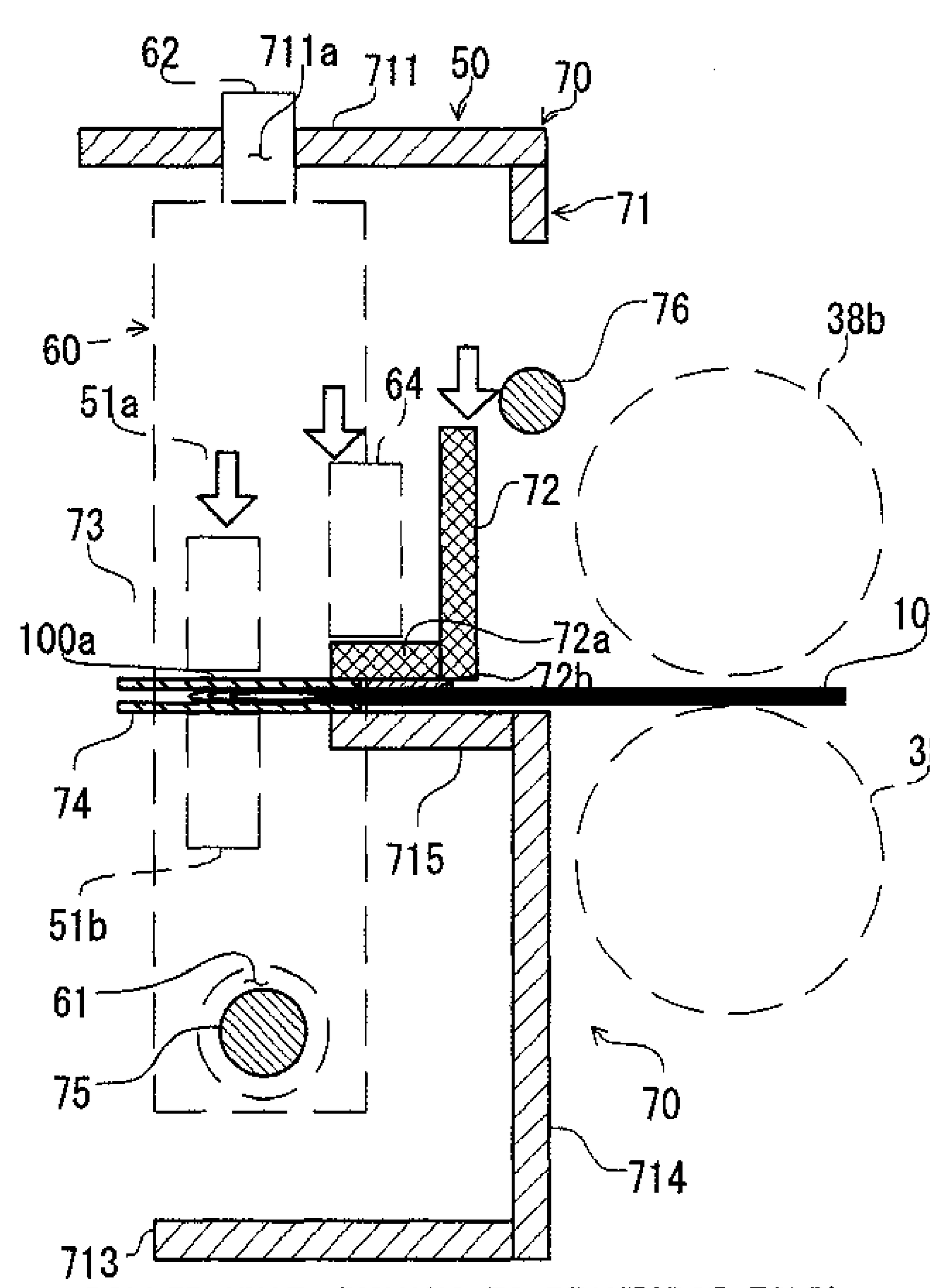
(57) **ABSTRACT**

A sheet folding apparatus includes: a saddle-stitching unit configured to stitch a center of a sheet bundle; a folding unit configured to fold the sheet bundle at the center to form a fold; a loading base onto which the sheet bundle conveyed from the folding unit is loaded; a nipping plate configured to be pressed to and separated from the loading base in parallel to the loading base and to nip the sheet bundle loaded onto the loading base; and first and second rollers that move along a direction of the fold while nipping and pressing the fold of the sheet bundle nipped by the nipping plate to reinforce the fold. Here, a surface, which faces the loading base, of the nipping plate is provided with an elastic member.

17 Claims, 41 Drawing Sheets



ROLLER UNIT IS STOPPED AT THE HOME POSITION
(A)



ROLLER UNIT (MOVING TO REINFORCE FOLD)
(B)

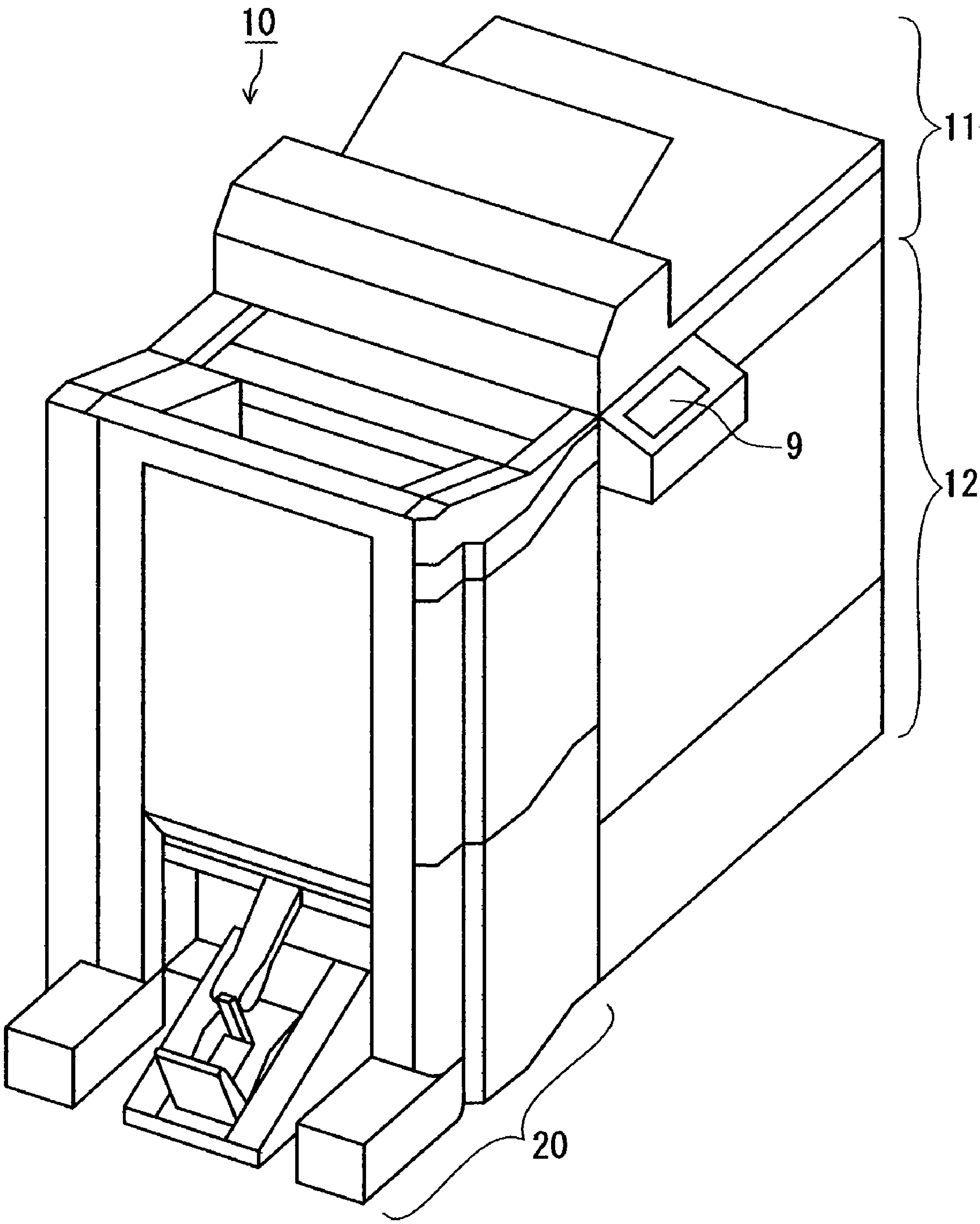


FIG. 1

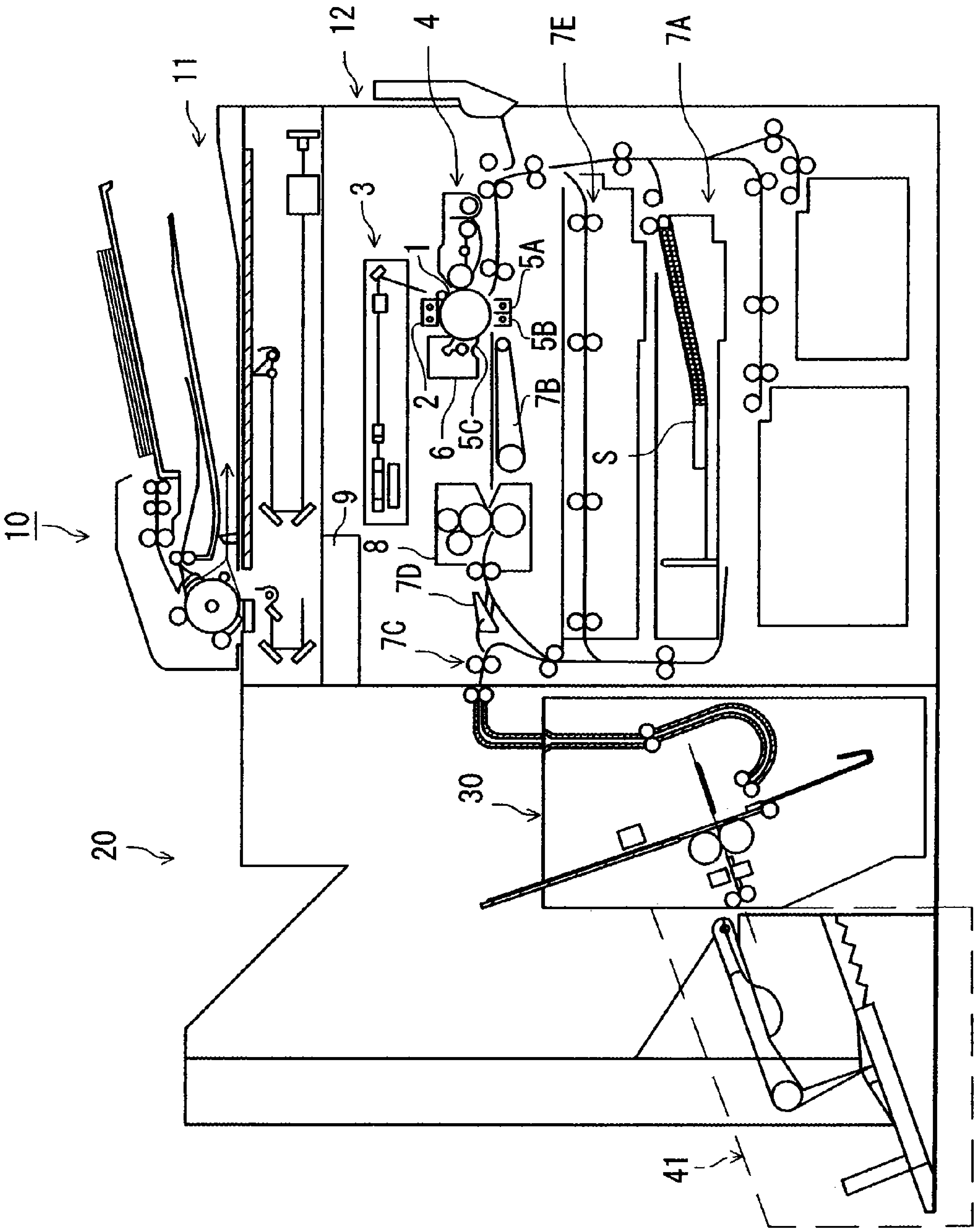


FIG. 2

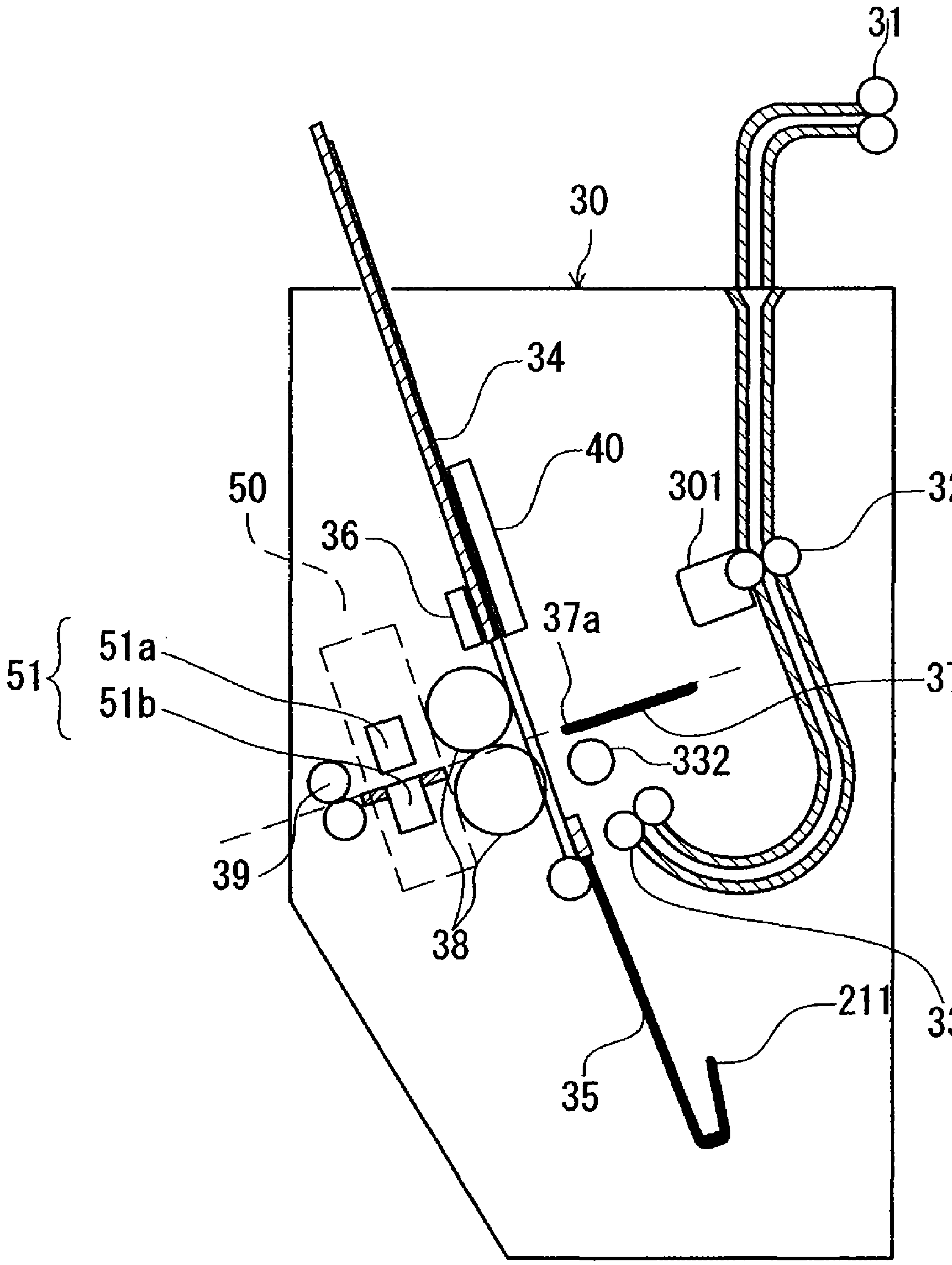


FIG. 3

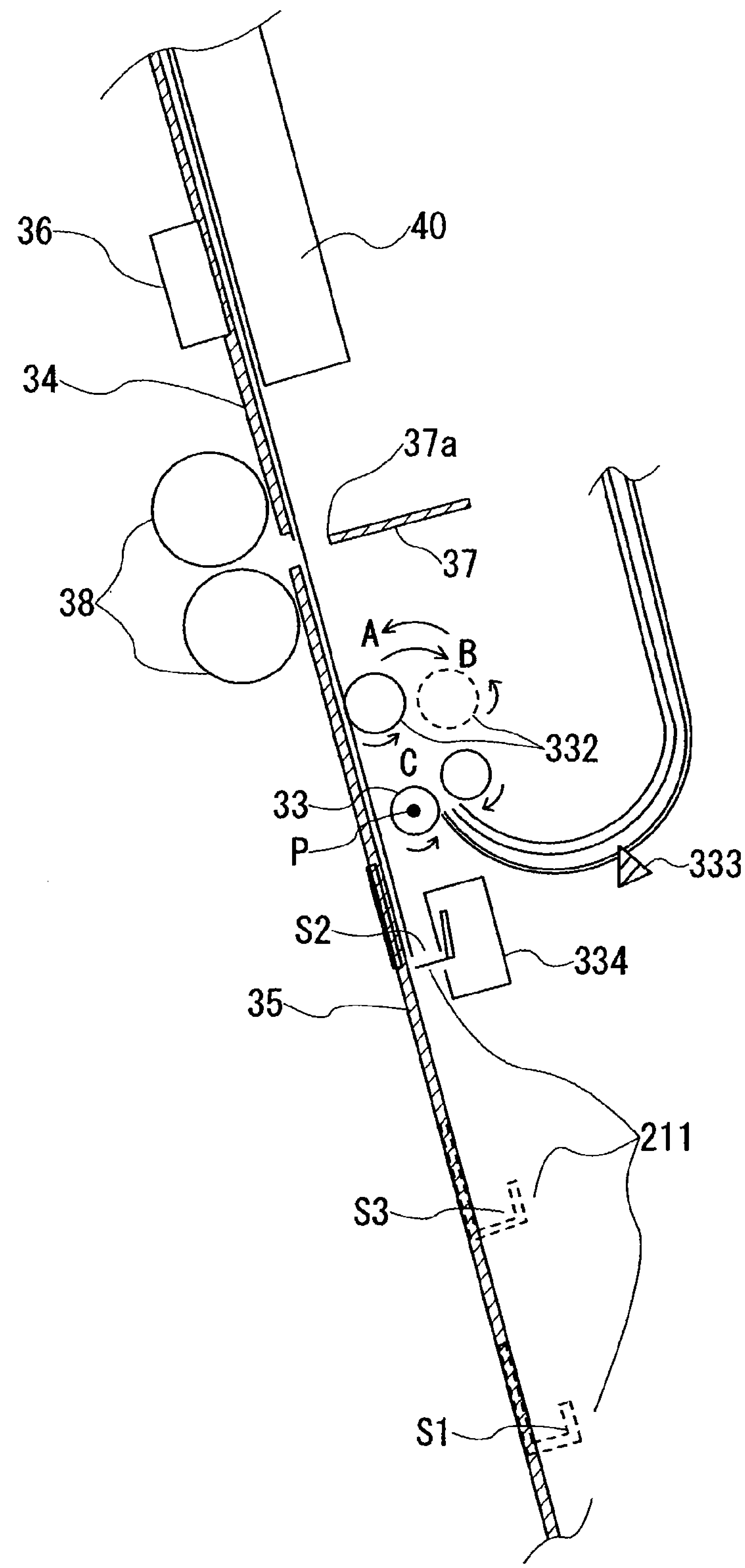


FIG. 4

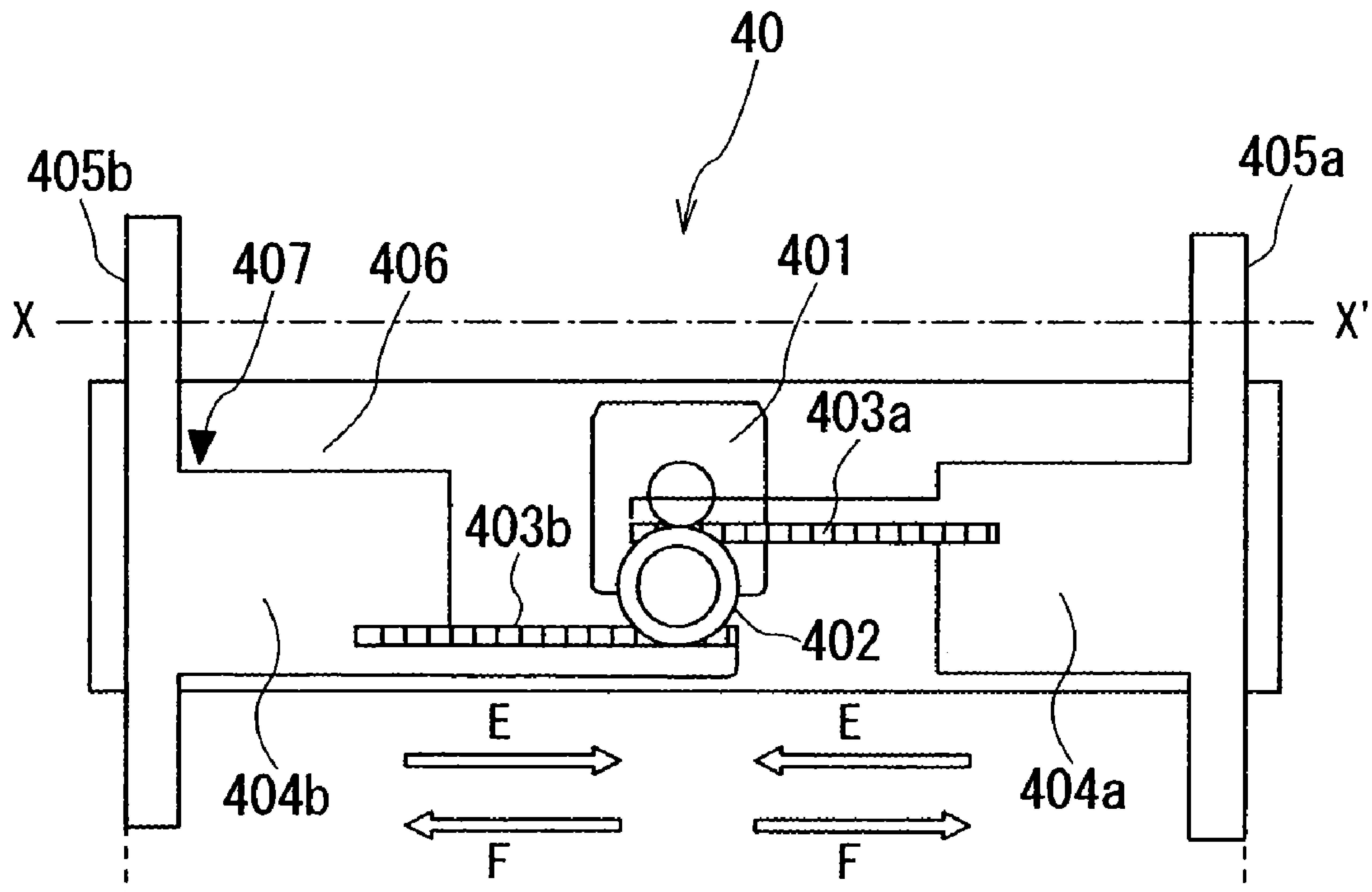

40
405b
405a
407
406
401
X
X'
403a
403b
402
404b
404a
E
E
F
F

FIG. 5A

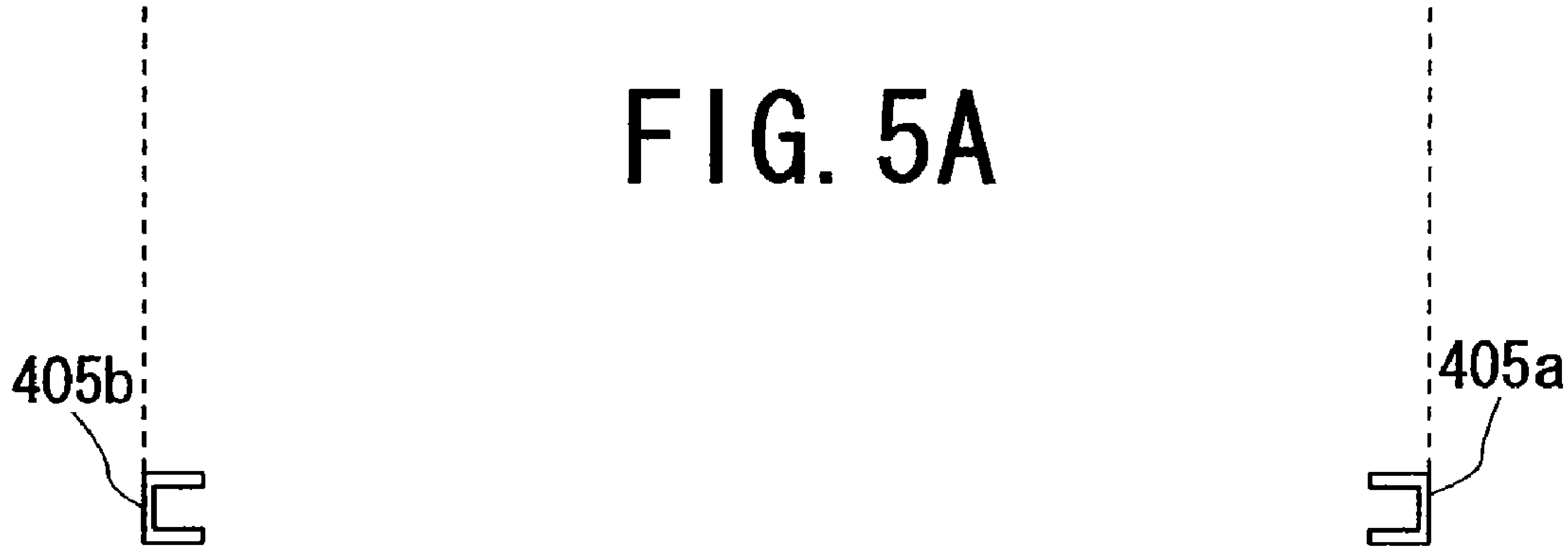

405b
405a

FIG. 5B

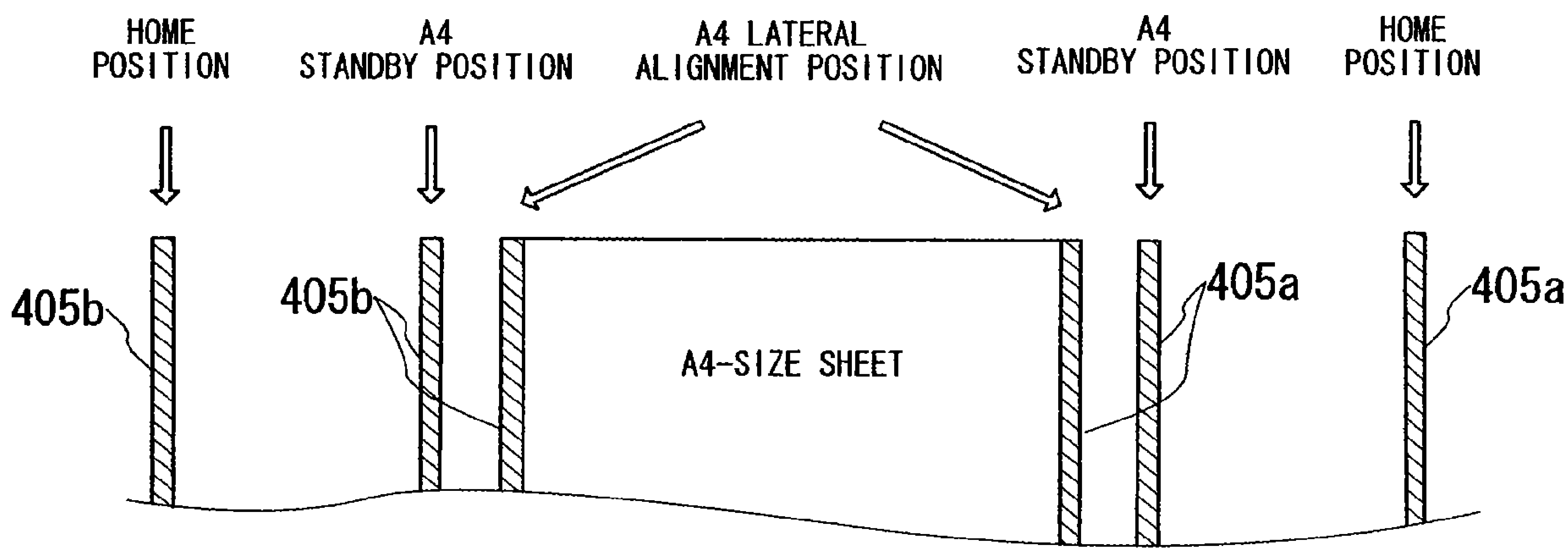

HOME
POSITION
A4
STANDBY POSITION
A4 LATERAL
ALIGNMENT POSITION
A4
STANDBY POSITION
HOME
POSITION
405b
405b
A4-SIZE SHEET
405a
405a

FIG. 6A

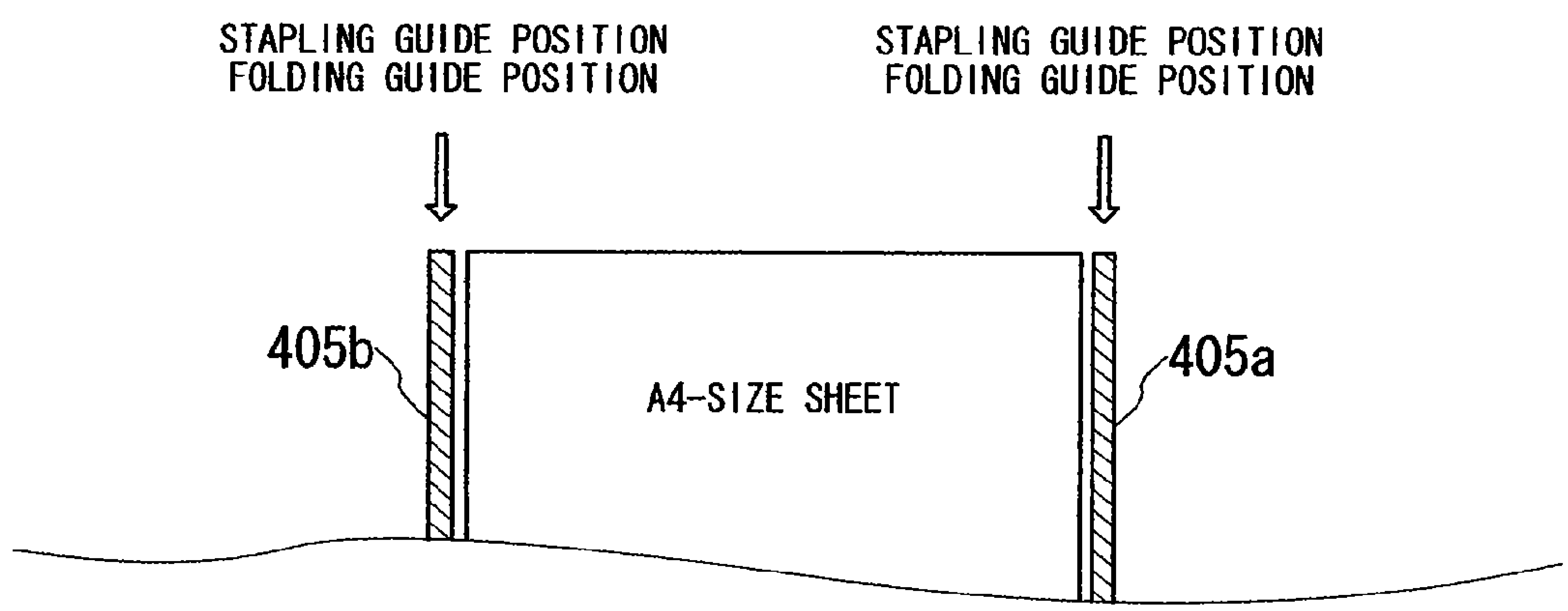

STAPLING GUIDE POSITION
FOLDING GUIDE POSITION
STAPLING GUIDE POSITION
FOLDING GUIDE POSITION
405b
A4-SIZE SHEET
405a

FIG. 6B

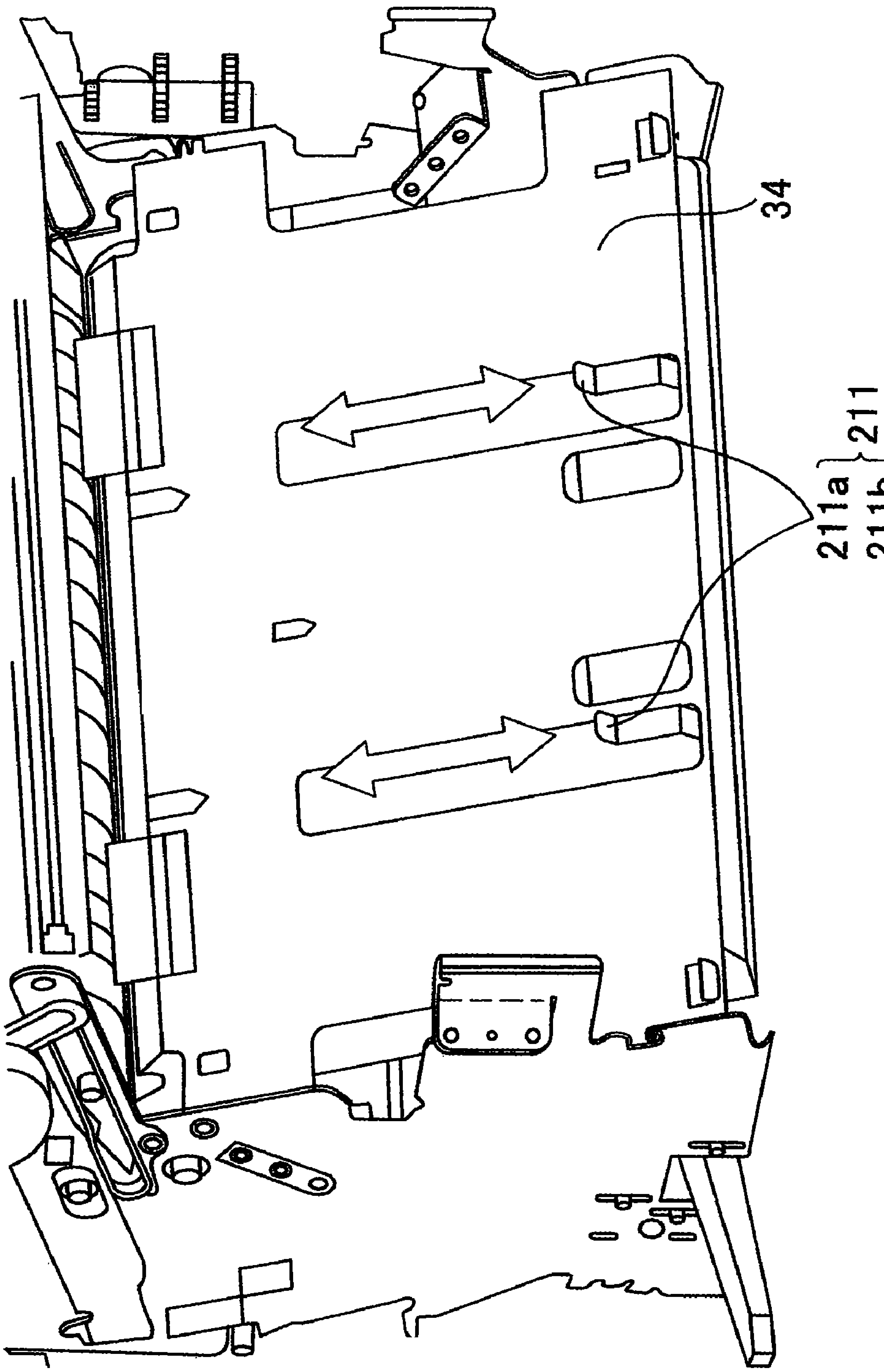


FIG. 7

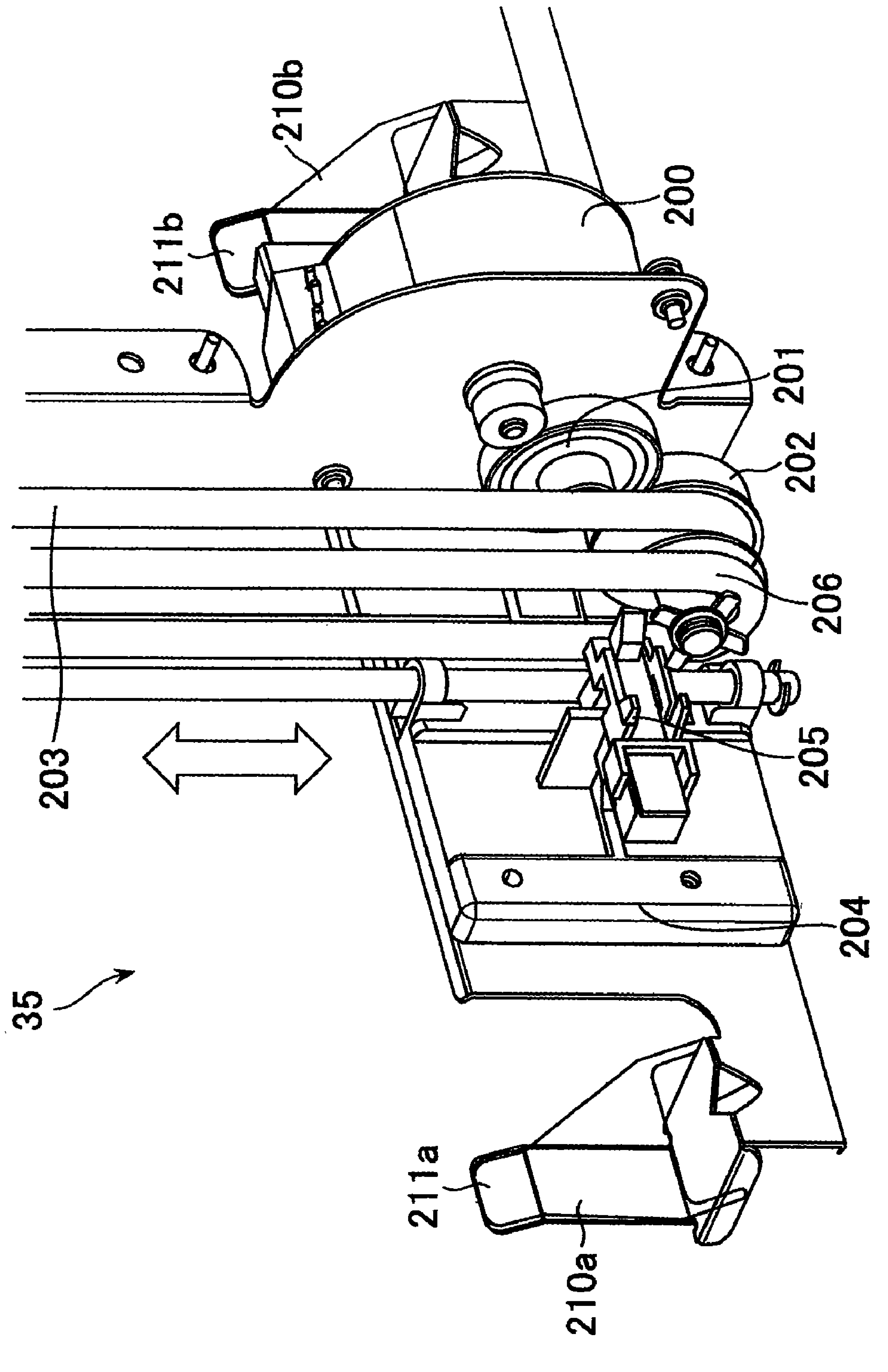


FIG. 8

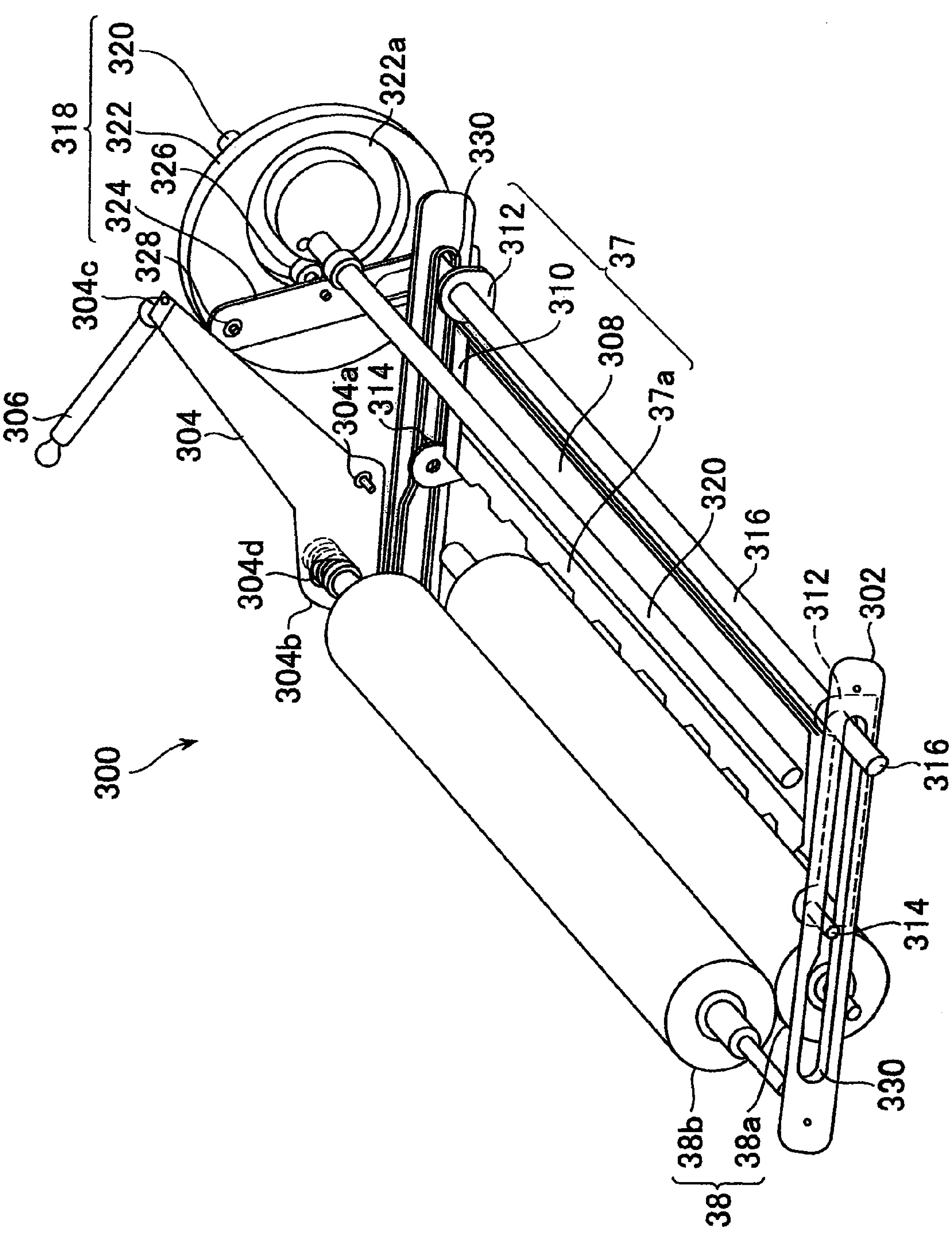

300
306
304
304c
328
324
326
322
320
318
322a
330
312
310
37
308
37a
304a
314
320
316
304d
304b
312
302
316
314
330
38b
38a
38

FIG. 9

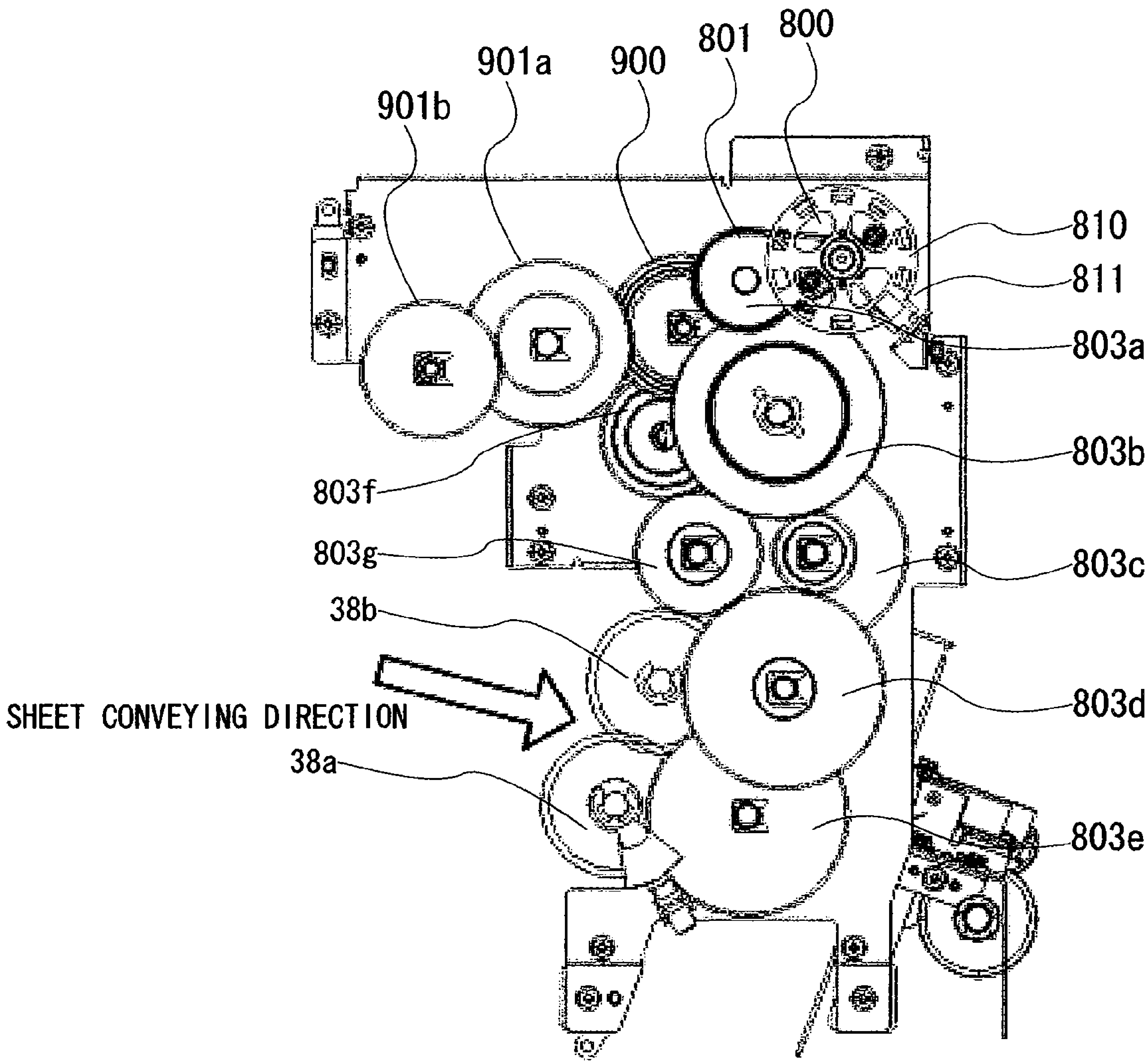

901b
901a
900
801
800
810
811
803a
803b
803f
803g
803c
38b
SHEET CONVEYING DIRECTION
803d
38a
803e

FIG. 10

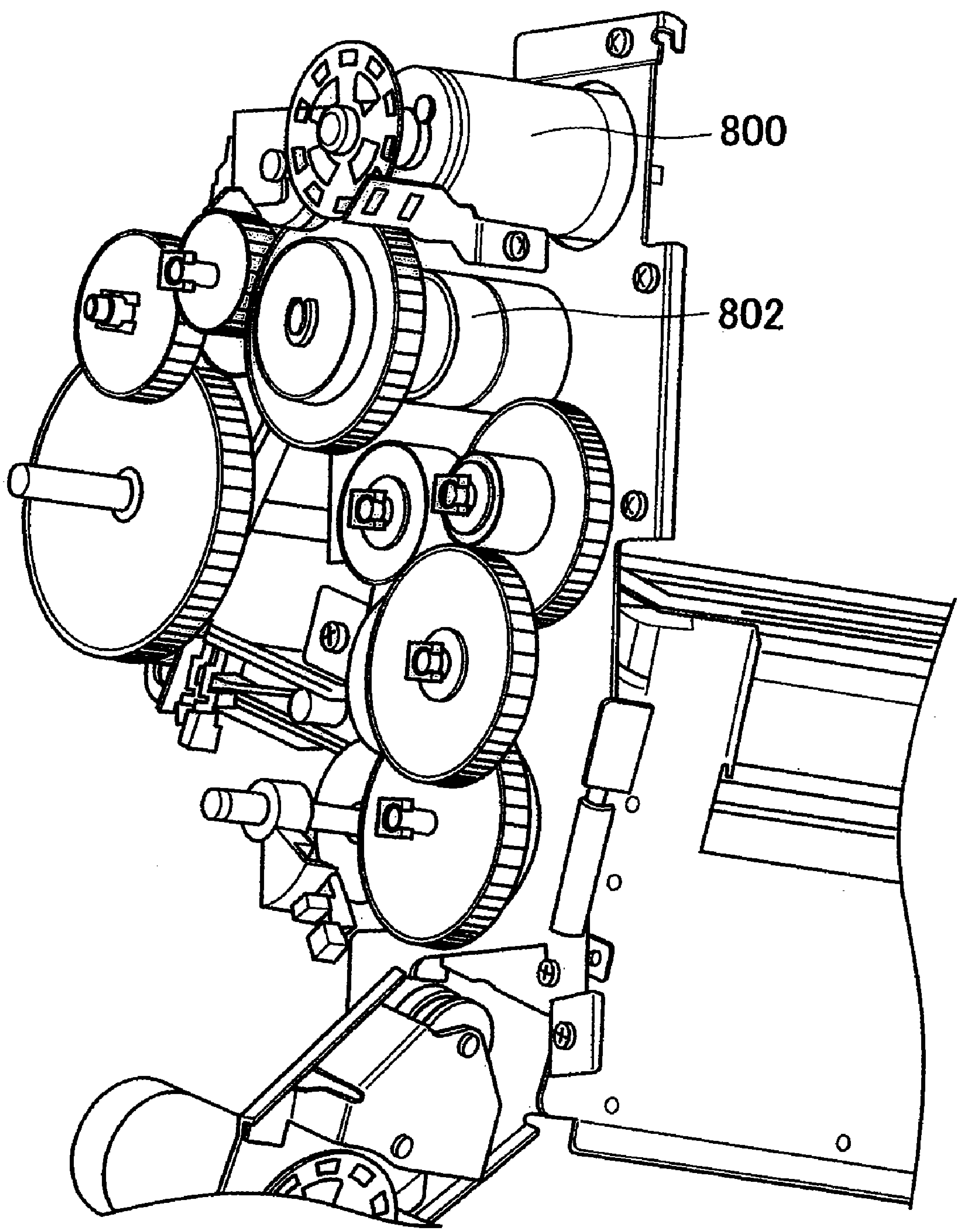


FIG. 11

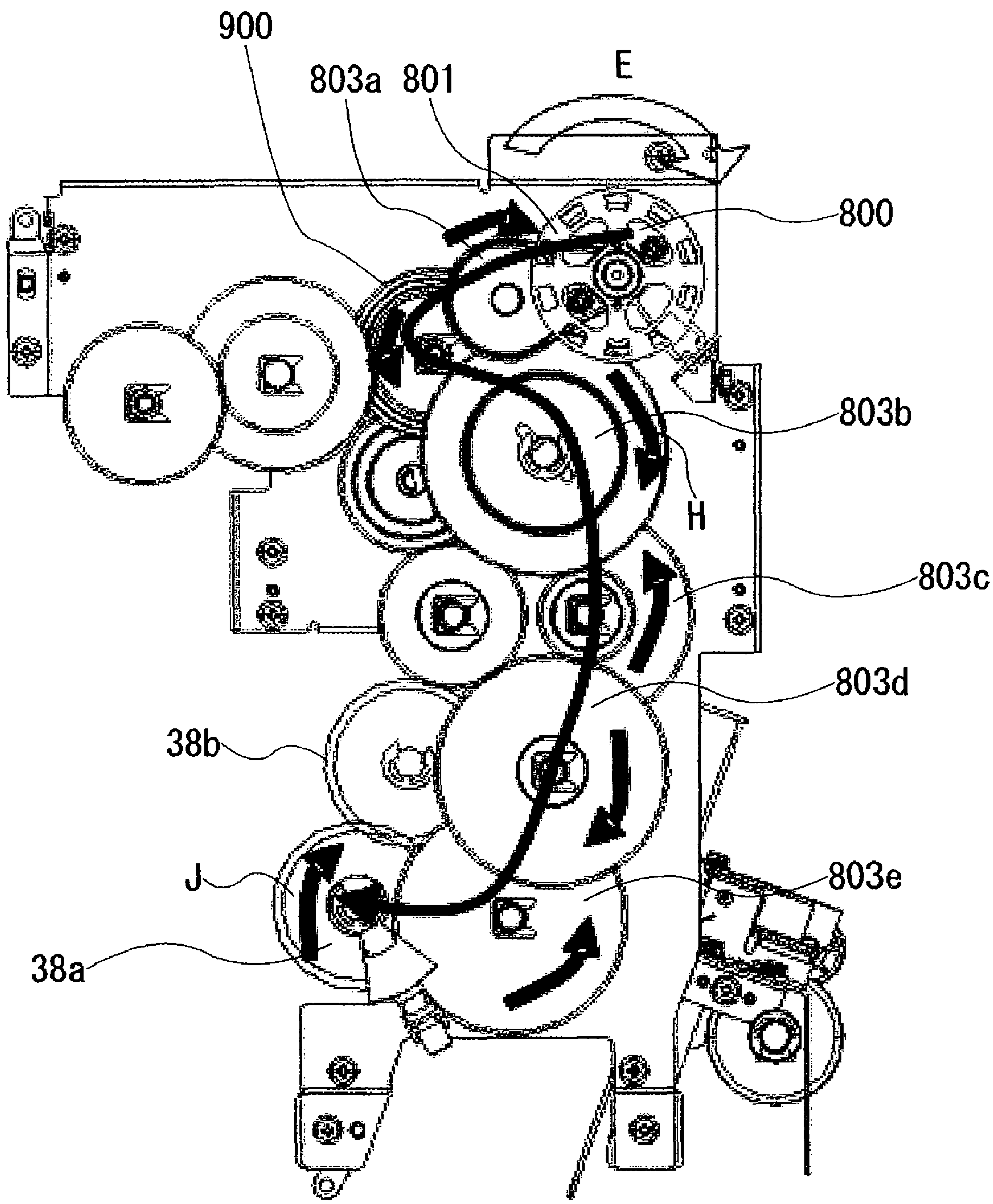


FIG. 12

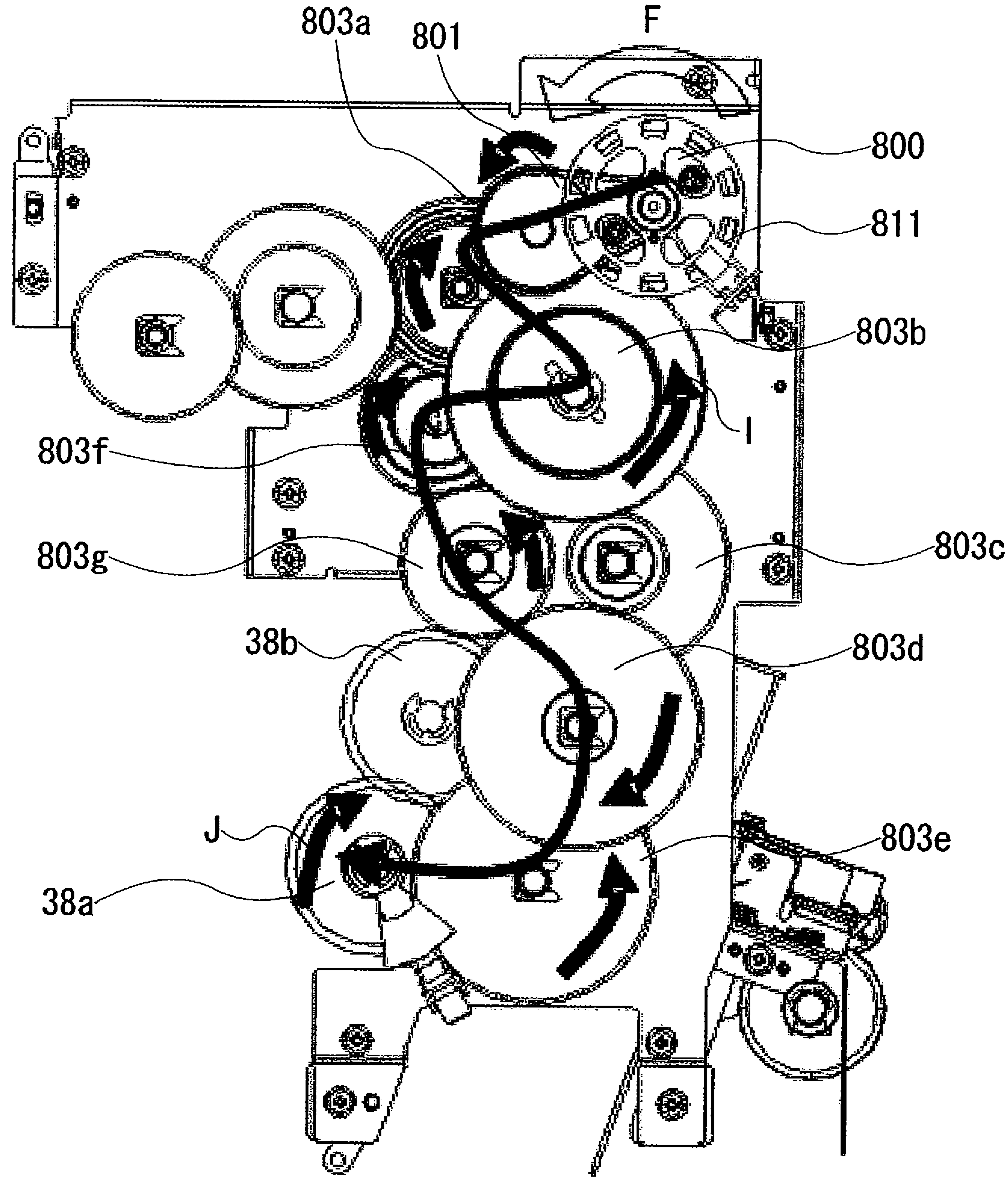


FIG. 13

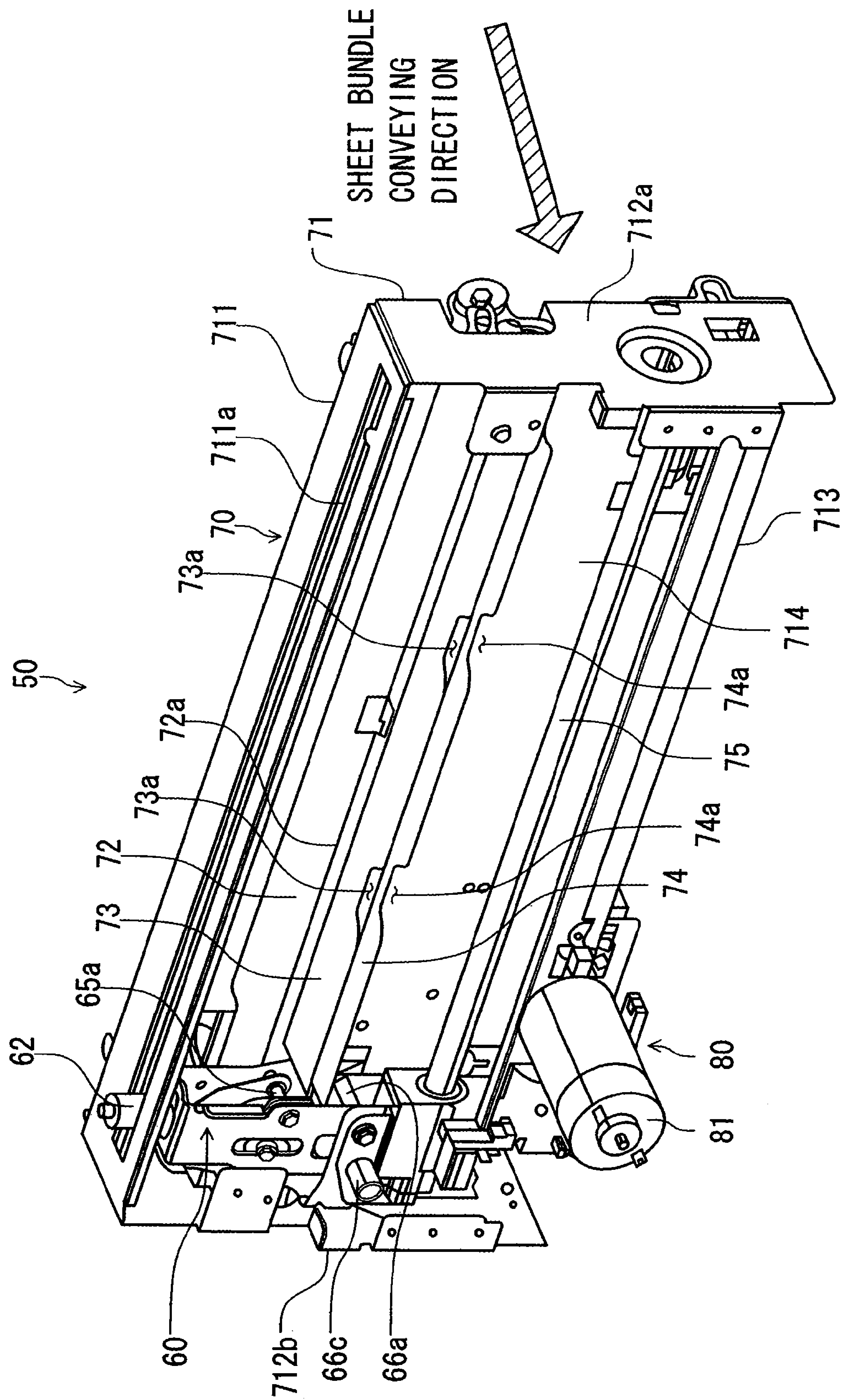
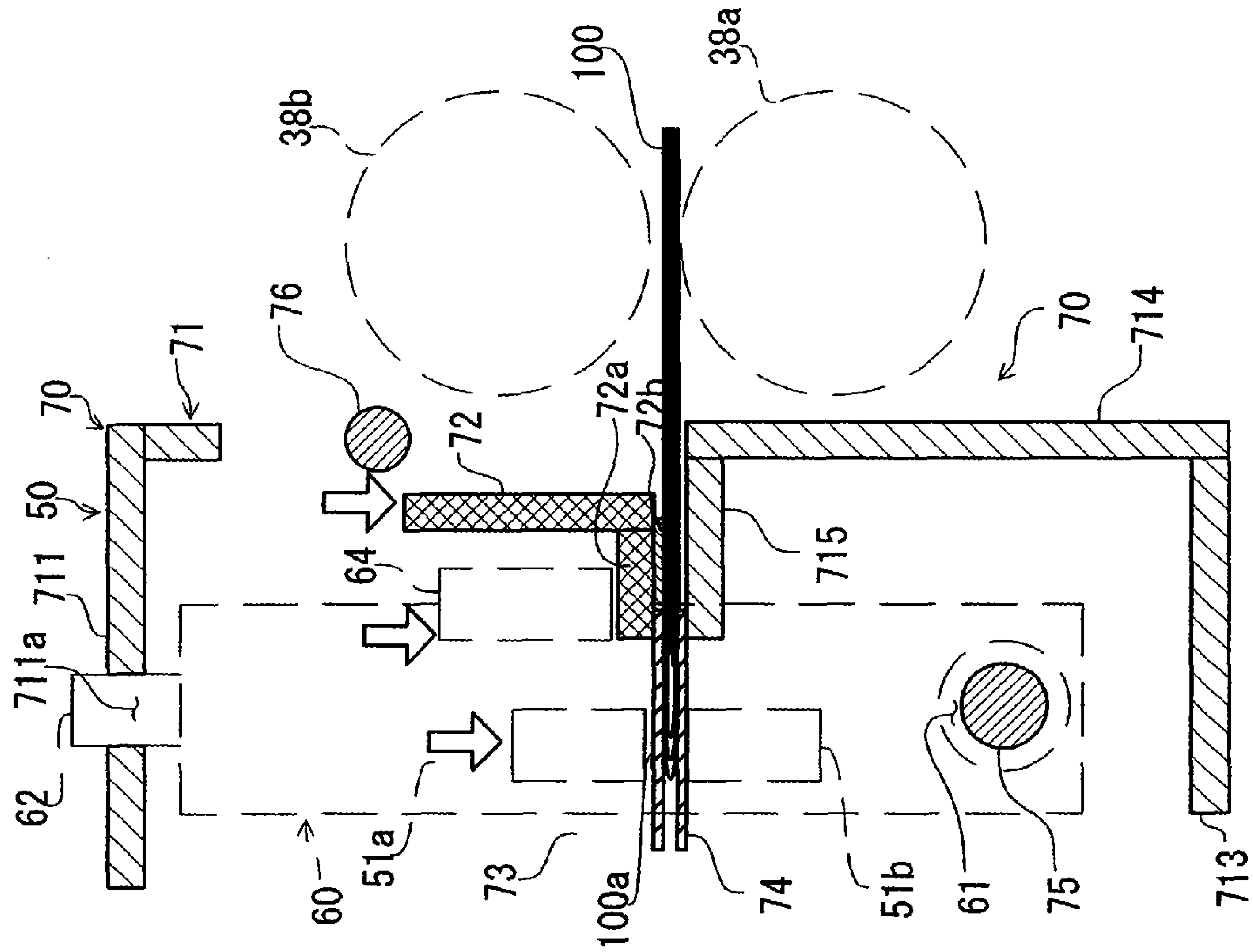
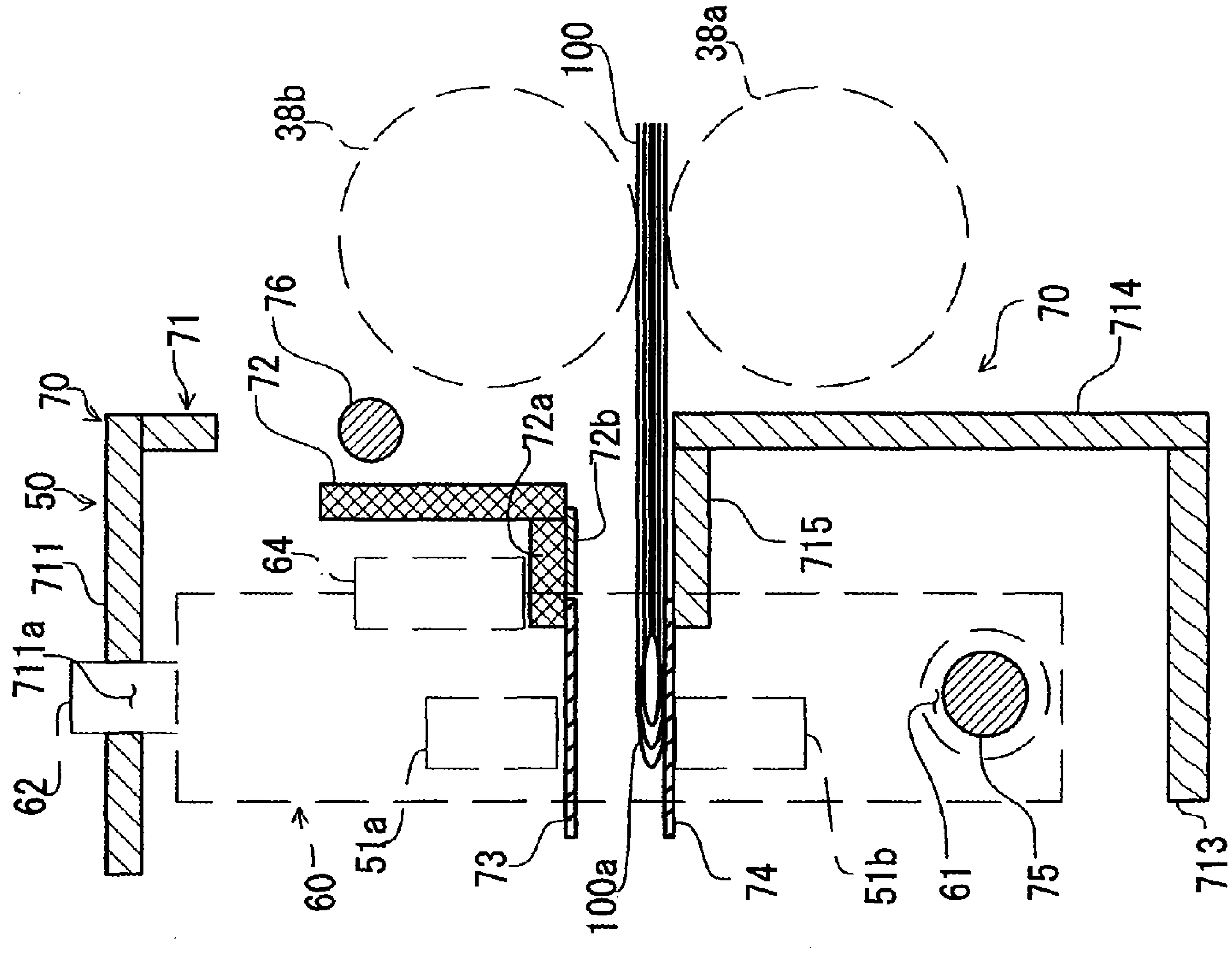

SHEET BUNDLE
CONVEYING
DIRECTION
50
70
71
711
711a
712a
712b
713
714
72
72a
73
73a
73a
74
74a
74a
75
60
62
65a
66a
66c
80
81

FIG. 14



ROLLER UNIT (MOVING TO REINFORCE FOLD)
(B)
FIG. 15B



ROLLER UNIT IS STOPPED AT THE HOME POSITION
(A)
FIG. 15A

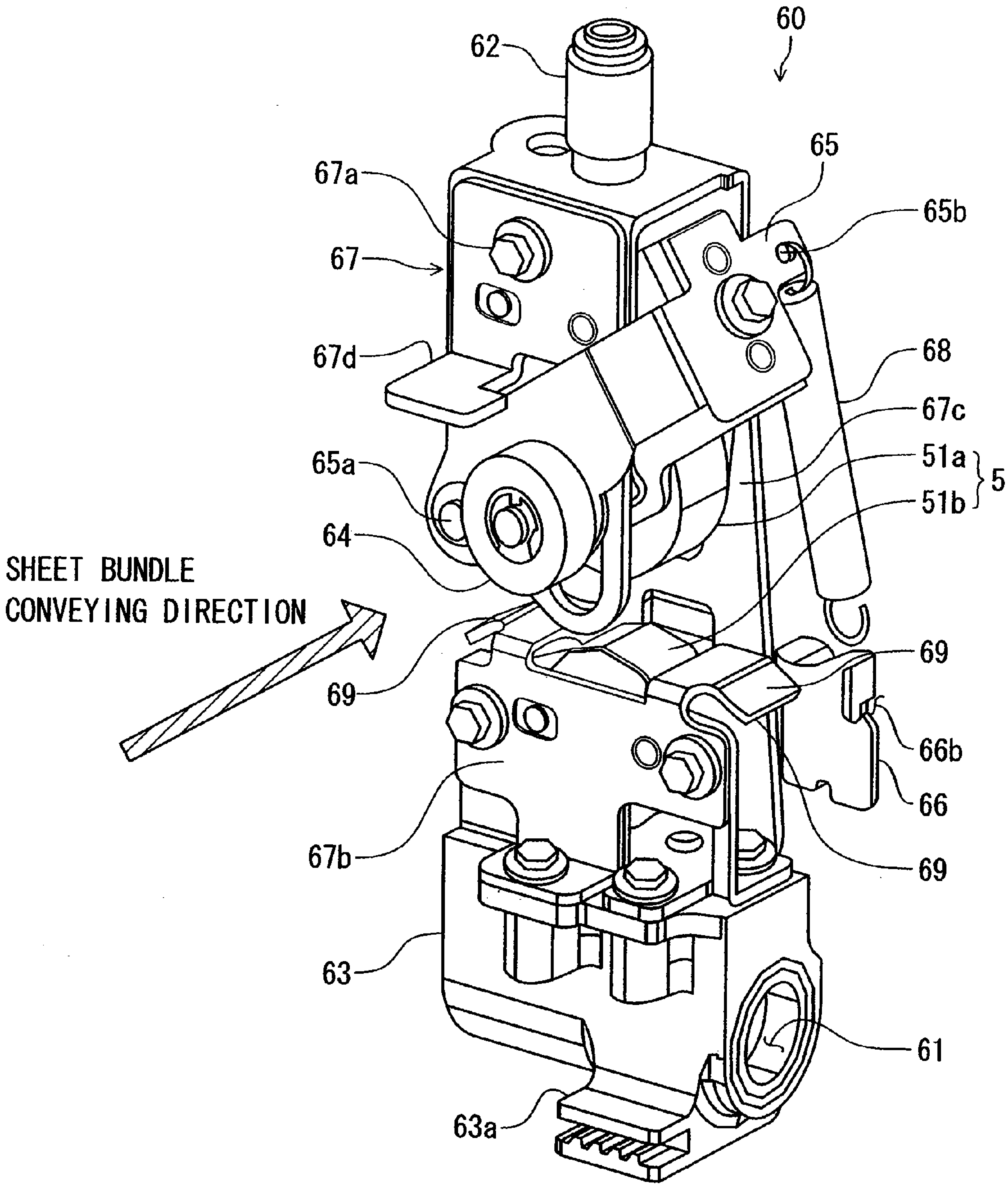

60
62
65
67a
65b
67
68
67d
67c
51a
51
65a
51b
64
SHEET BUNDLE
CONVEYING DIRECTION
69
69
66b
66
67b
69
63
61
63a

FIG. 16

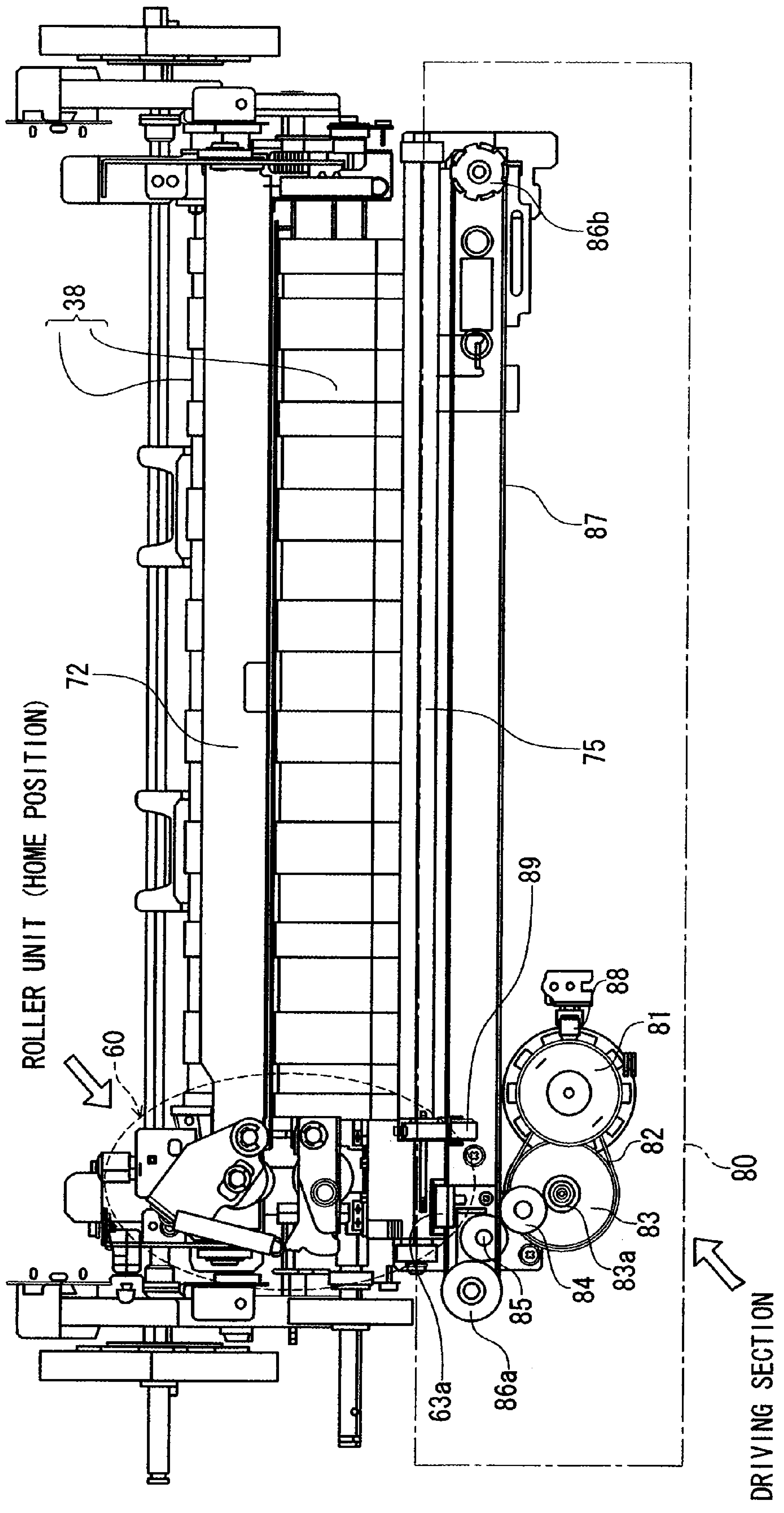

ROLLER UNIT (HOME POSITION)
60
72
38
86b
87
75
89
88
81
82
80
83
83a
84
85
86a
63a
DRIVING SECTION

FIG. 17

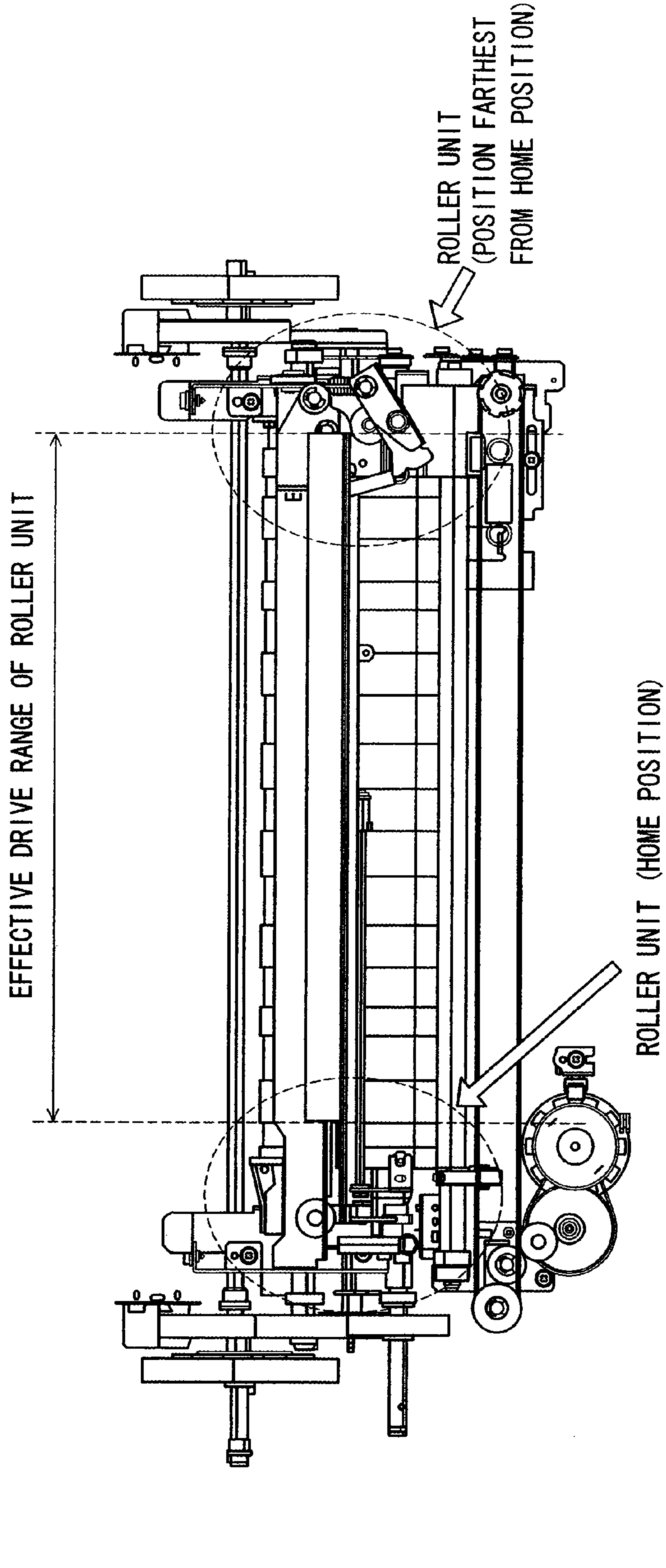
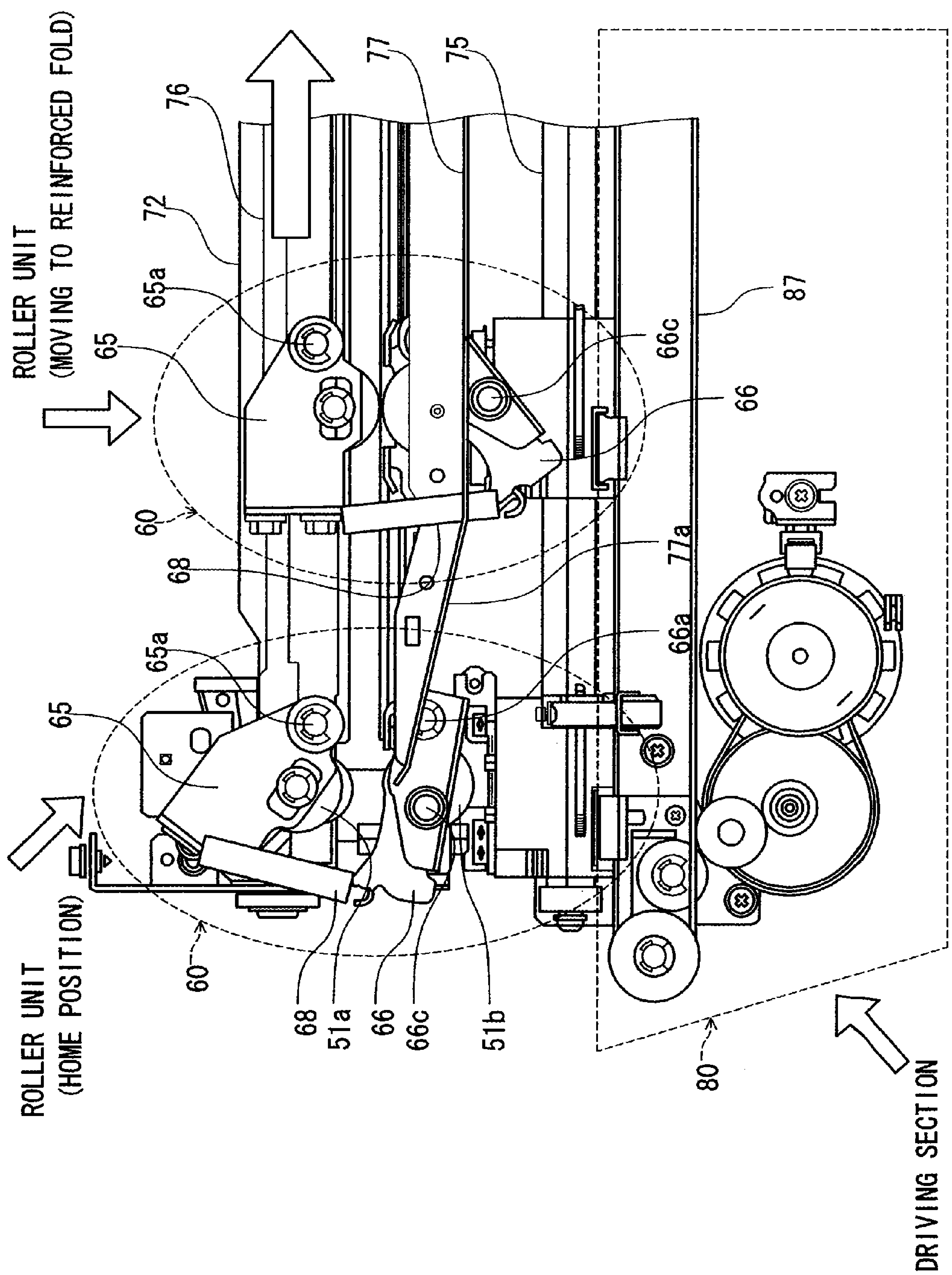

ROLLER UNIT (POSITION FARTHEST FROM HOME POSITION)
EFFECTIVE DRIVE RANGE OF ROLLER UNIT
ROLLER UNIT (HOME POSITION)

FIG. 18



ROLLER UNIT
(MOVING TO REINFORCED FOLD)
ROLLER UNIT
(HOME POSITION)
DRIVING SECTION
76
72
77
75
65a
65
66c
66
87
60
68
77a
66a
51a
66c
51b
80

FIG. 19

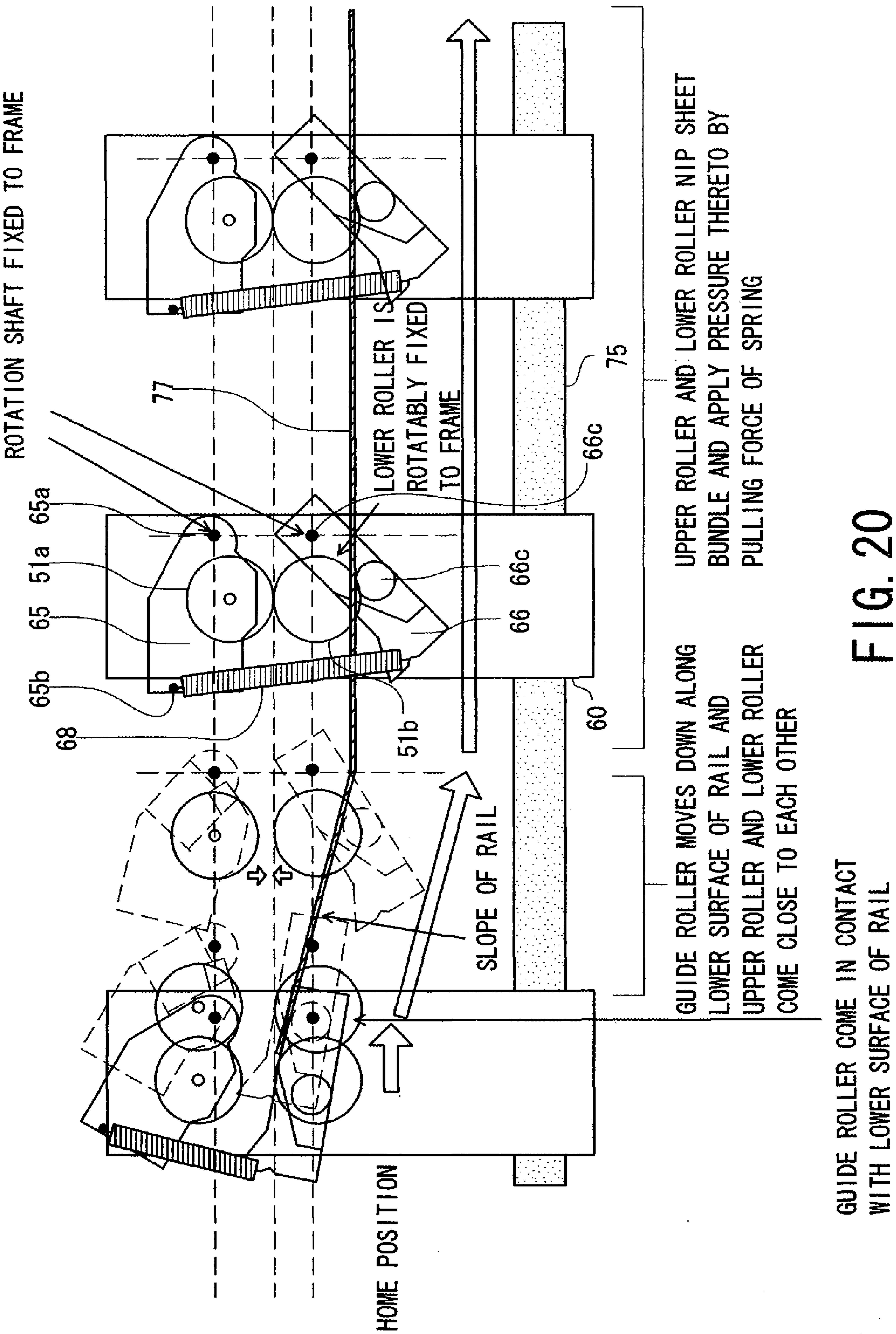

ROTATION SHAFT FIXED TO FRAME
65b
68
65
51a
65a
51b
66
66c
LOWER ROLLER IS ROTATABLY FIXED TO FRAME
77
60
66c
75
HOME POSITION
SLOPE OF RAIL
GUIDE ROLLER COME IN CONTACT WITH LOWER SURFACE OF RAIL
GUIDE ROLLER MOVES DOWN ALONG LOWER SURFACE OF RAIL AND UPPER ROLLER AND LOWER ROLLER COME CLOSE TO EACH OTHER
UPPER ROLLER AND LOWER ROLLER NIP SHEET BUNDLE AND APPLY PRESSURE THERETO BY PULLING FORCE OF SPRING

FIG. 20

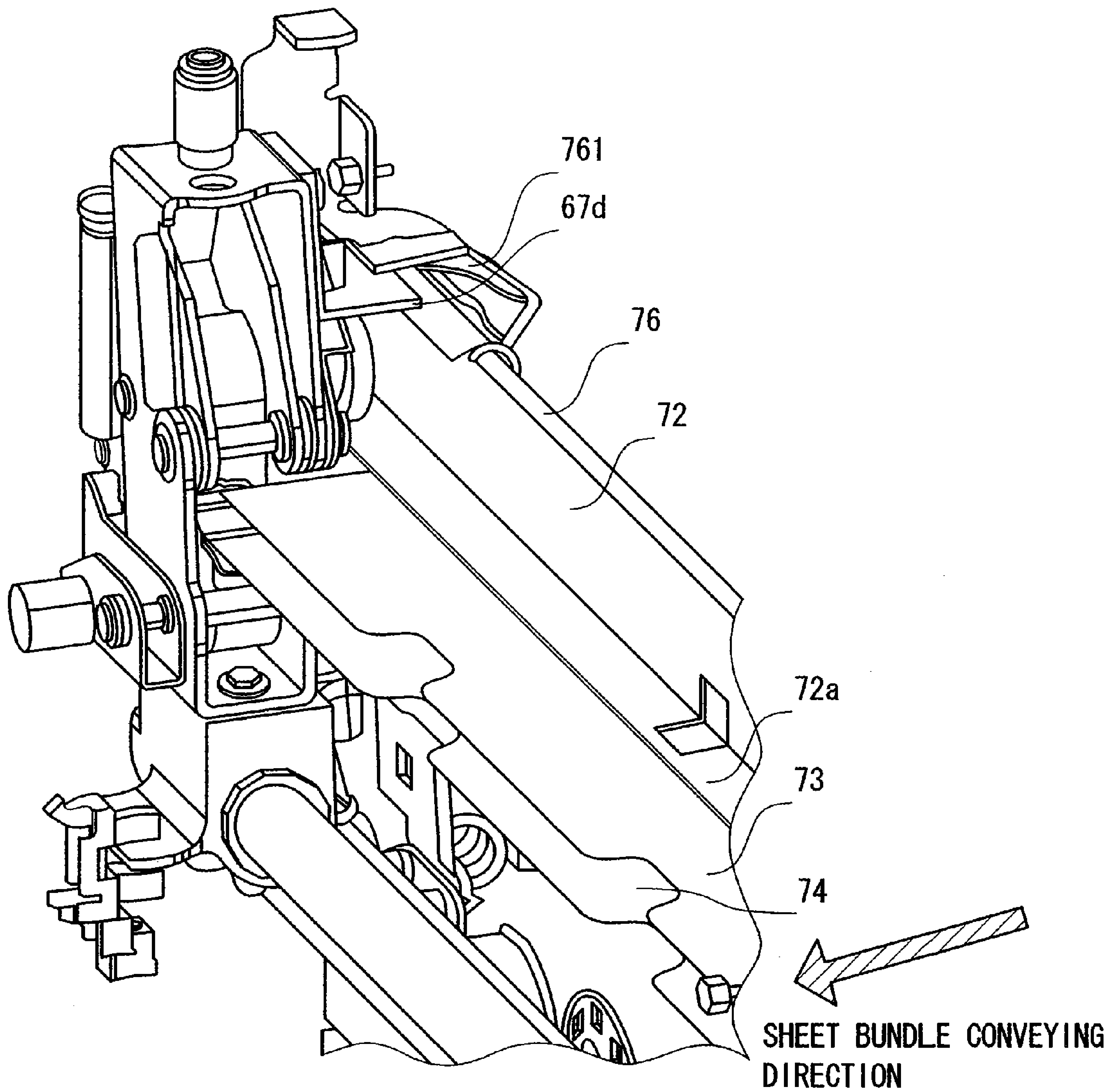


FIG. 21

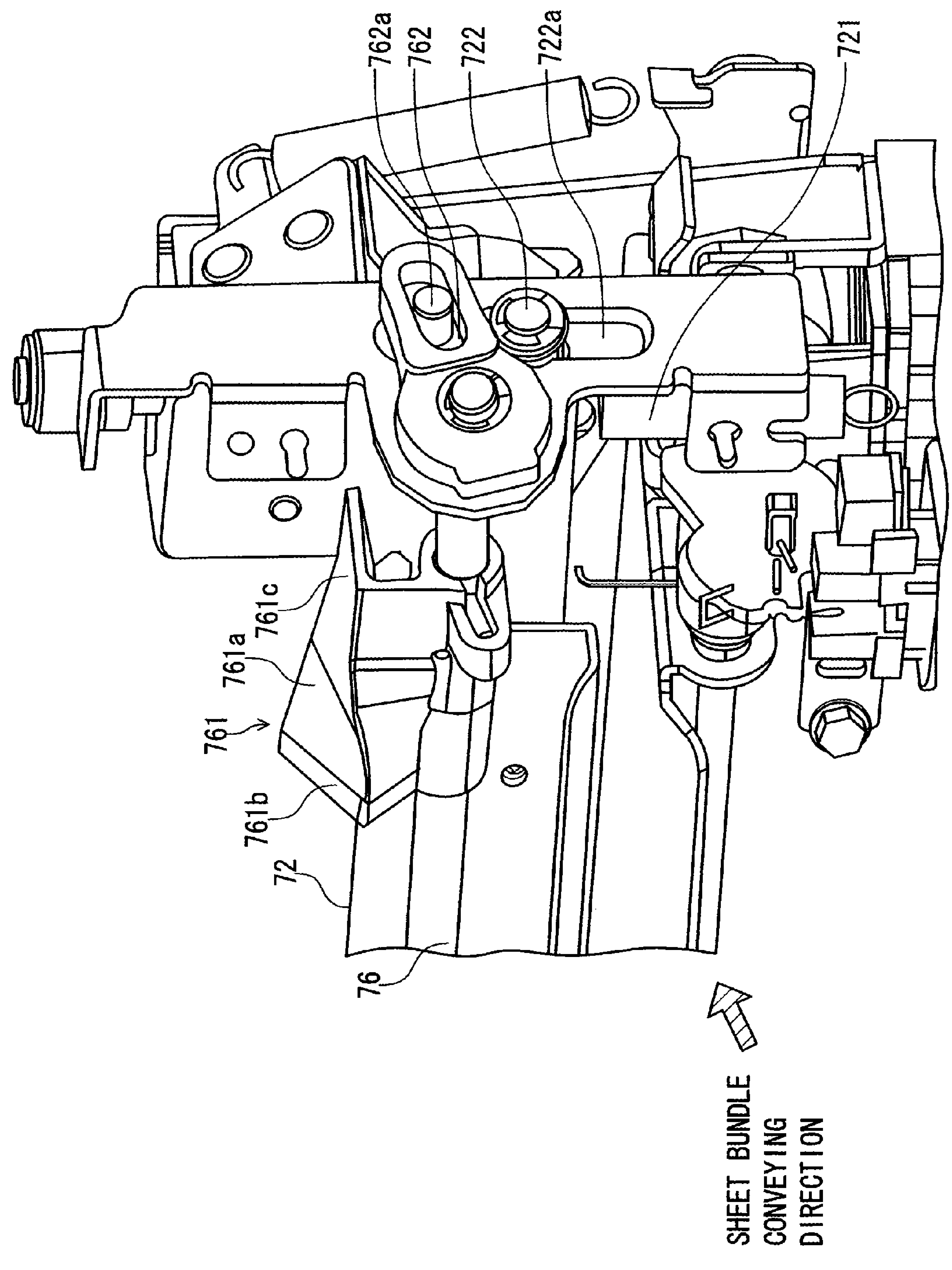

762a
762
722
722a
721
761c
761a
761
761b
72
76
SHEET BUNDLE
CONVEYING
DIRECTION

FIG. 22

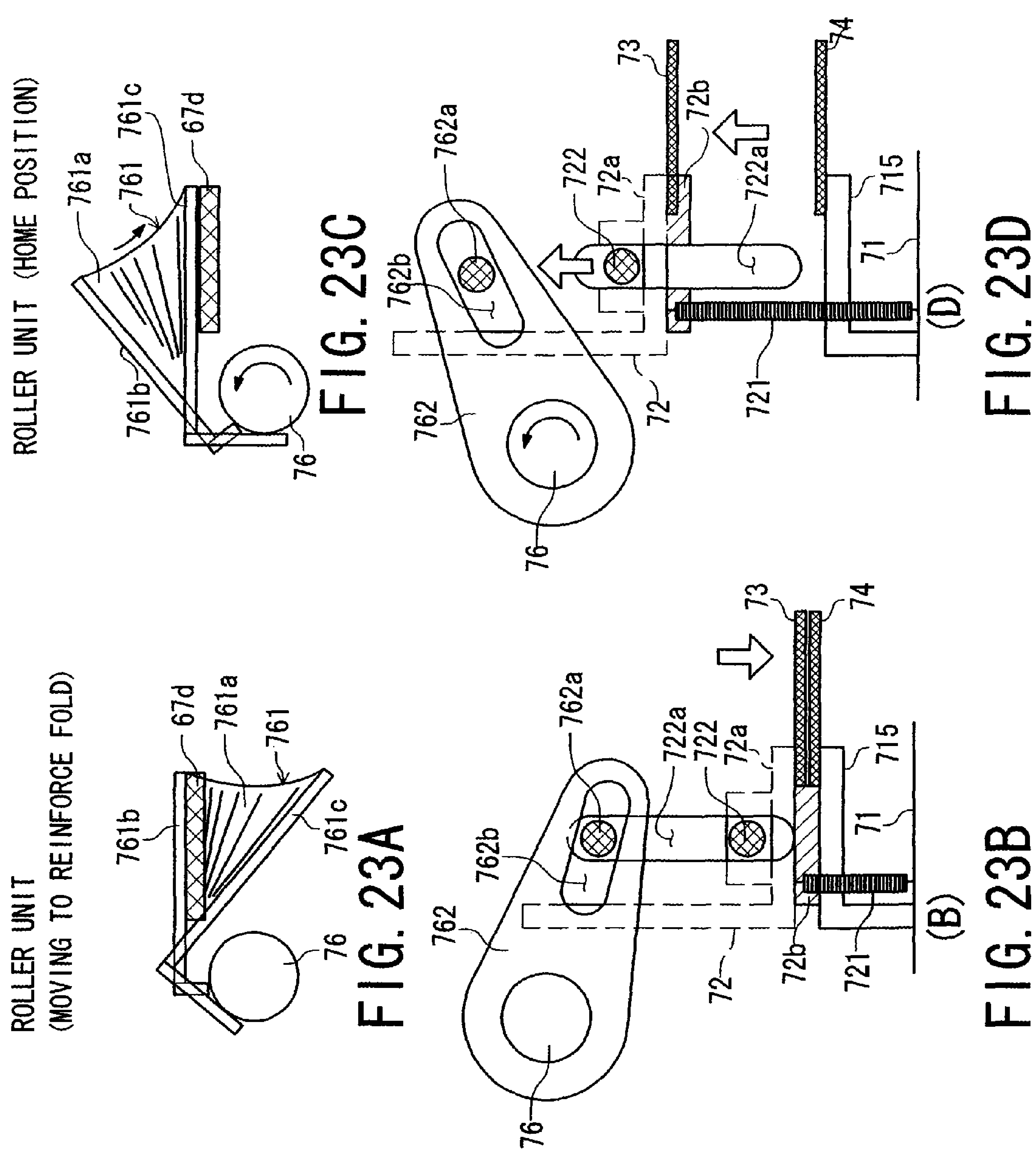


FIG. 23A

FIG. 23B

FIG. 23C

FIG. 23D

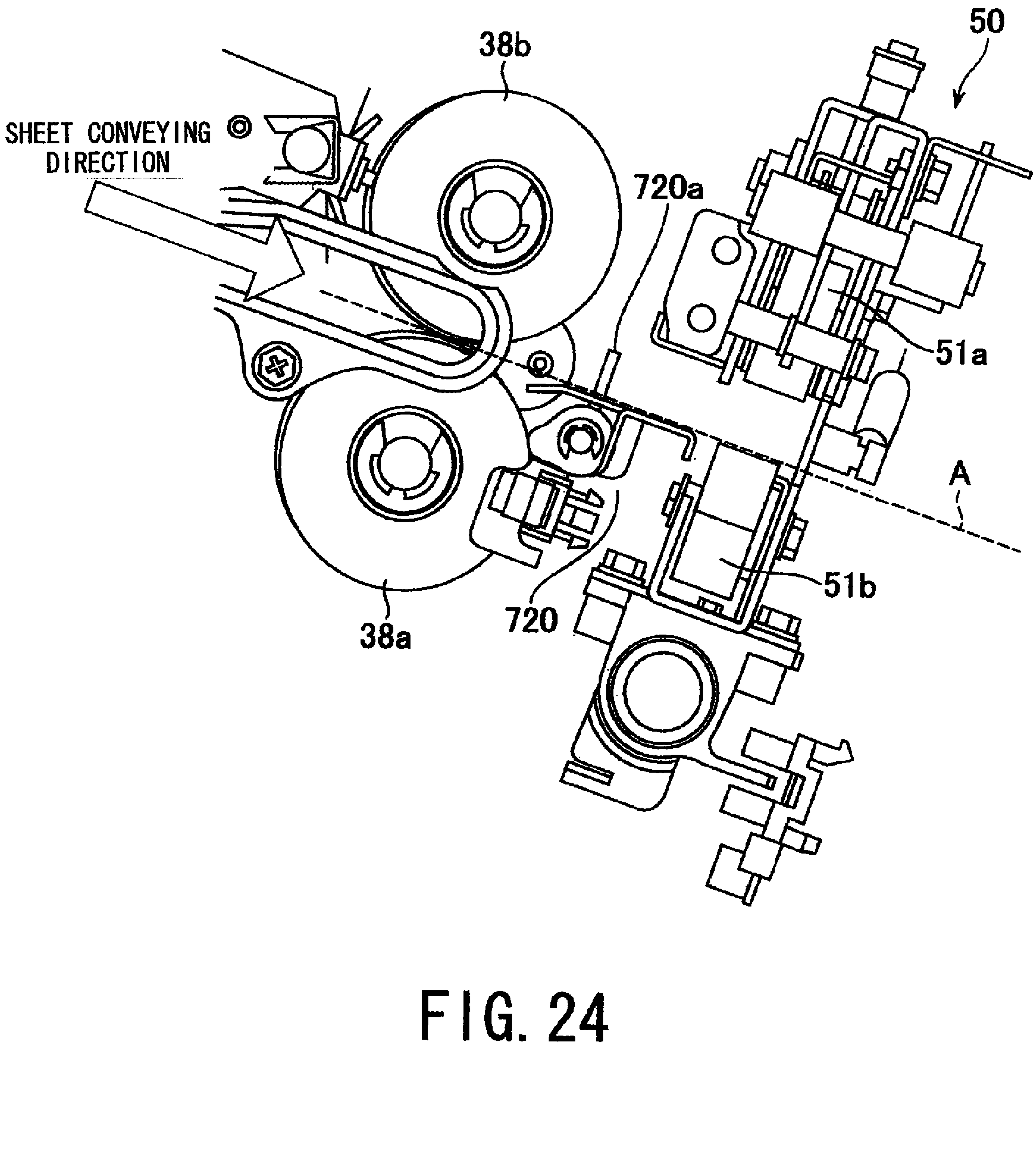


FIG. 24

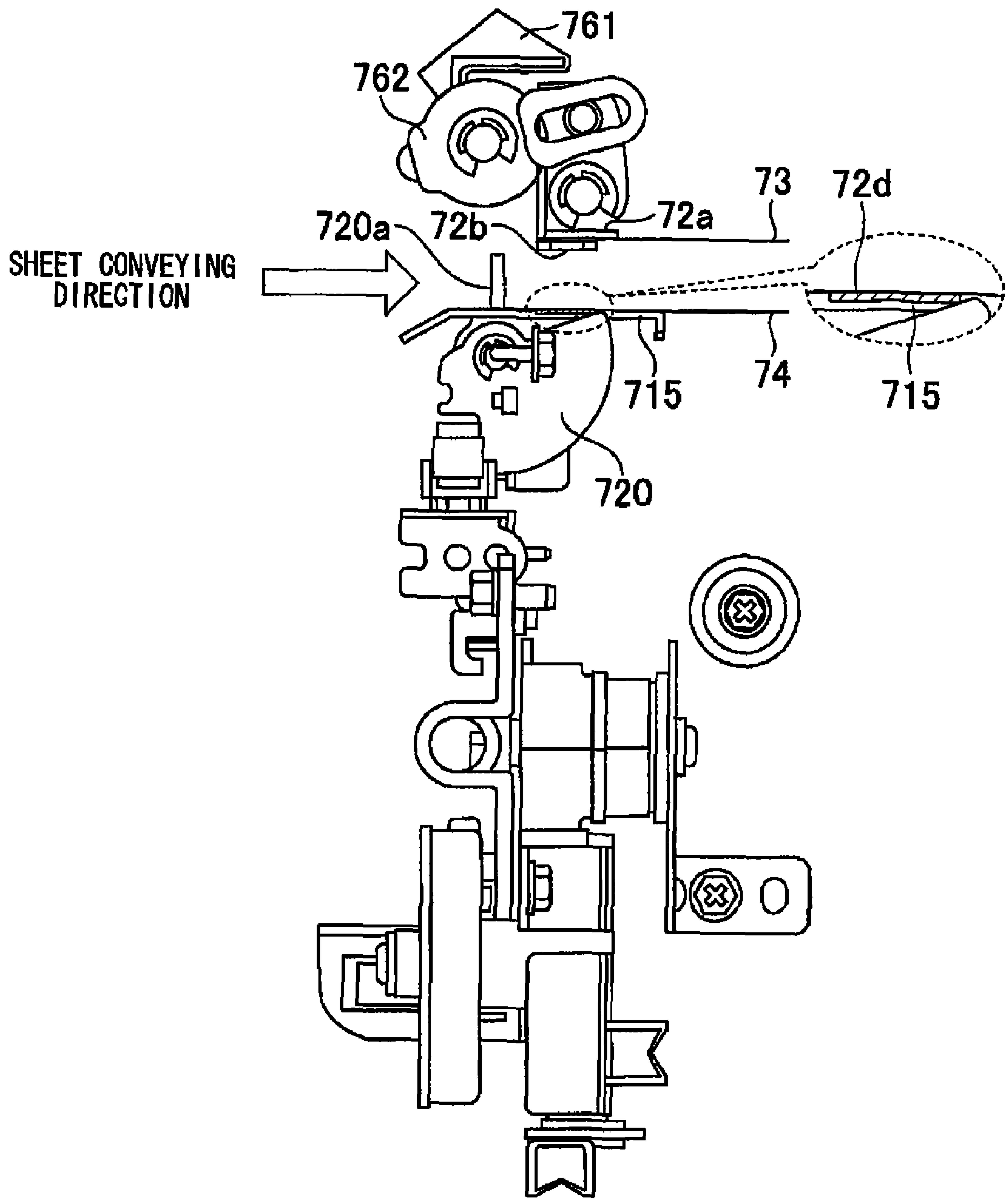

761
762
73
72d
72a
720a
72b
SHEET CONVEYING DIRECTION
715
74
715
720

FIG. 25

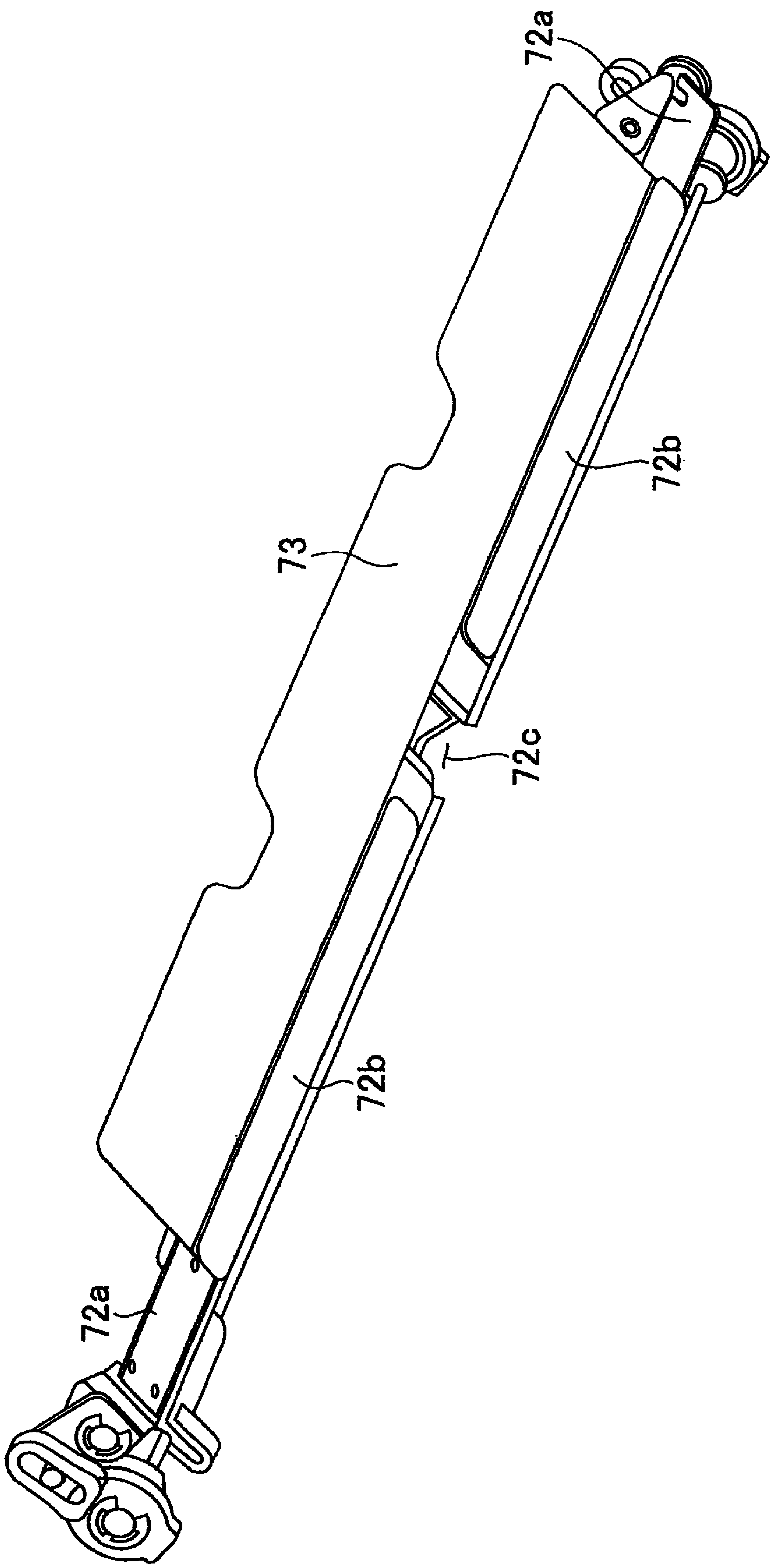


FIG. 26

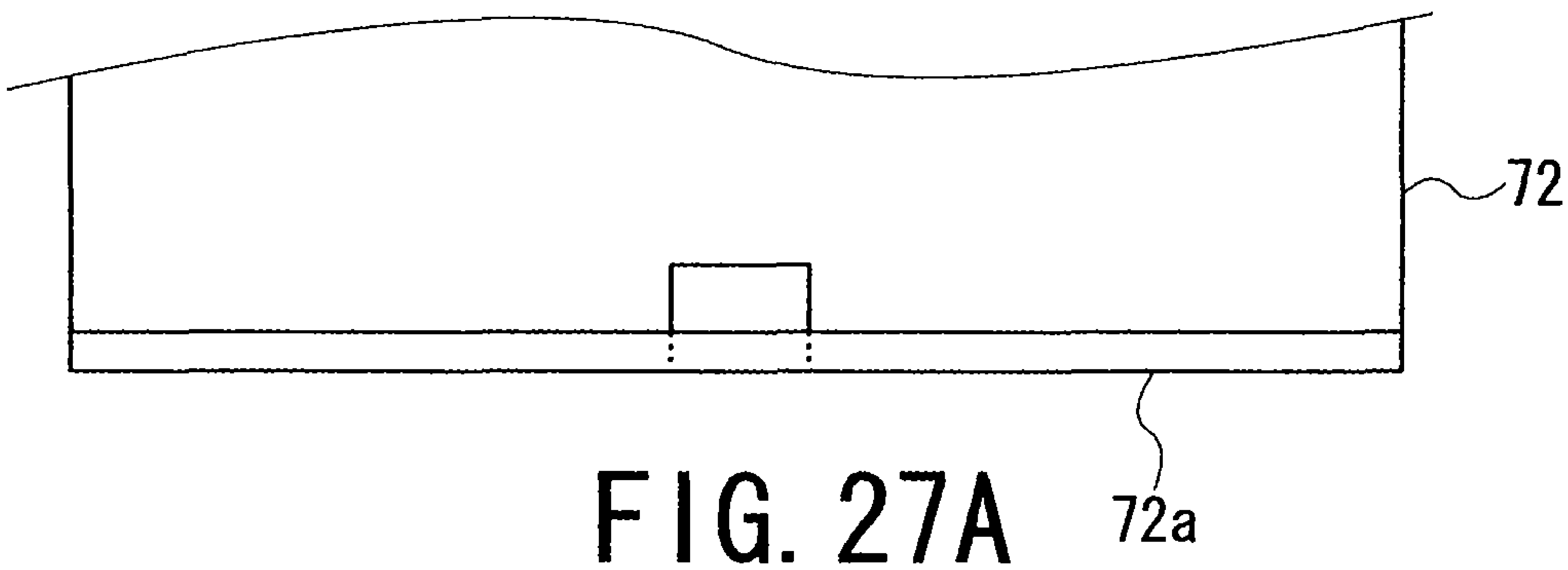


FIG. 27A

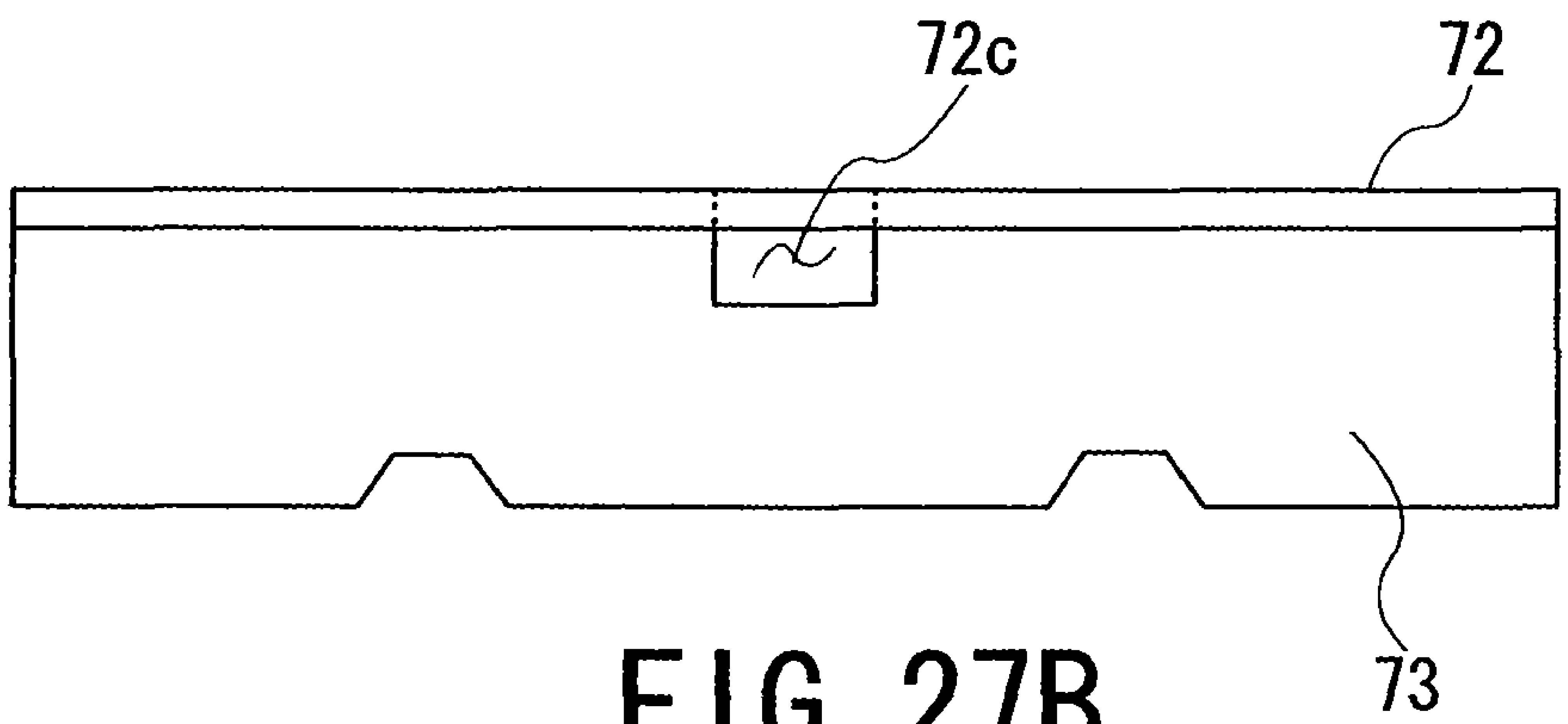


FIG. 27B

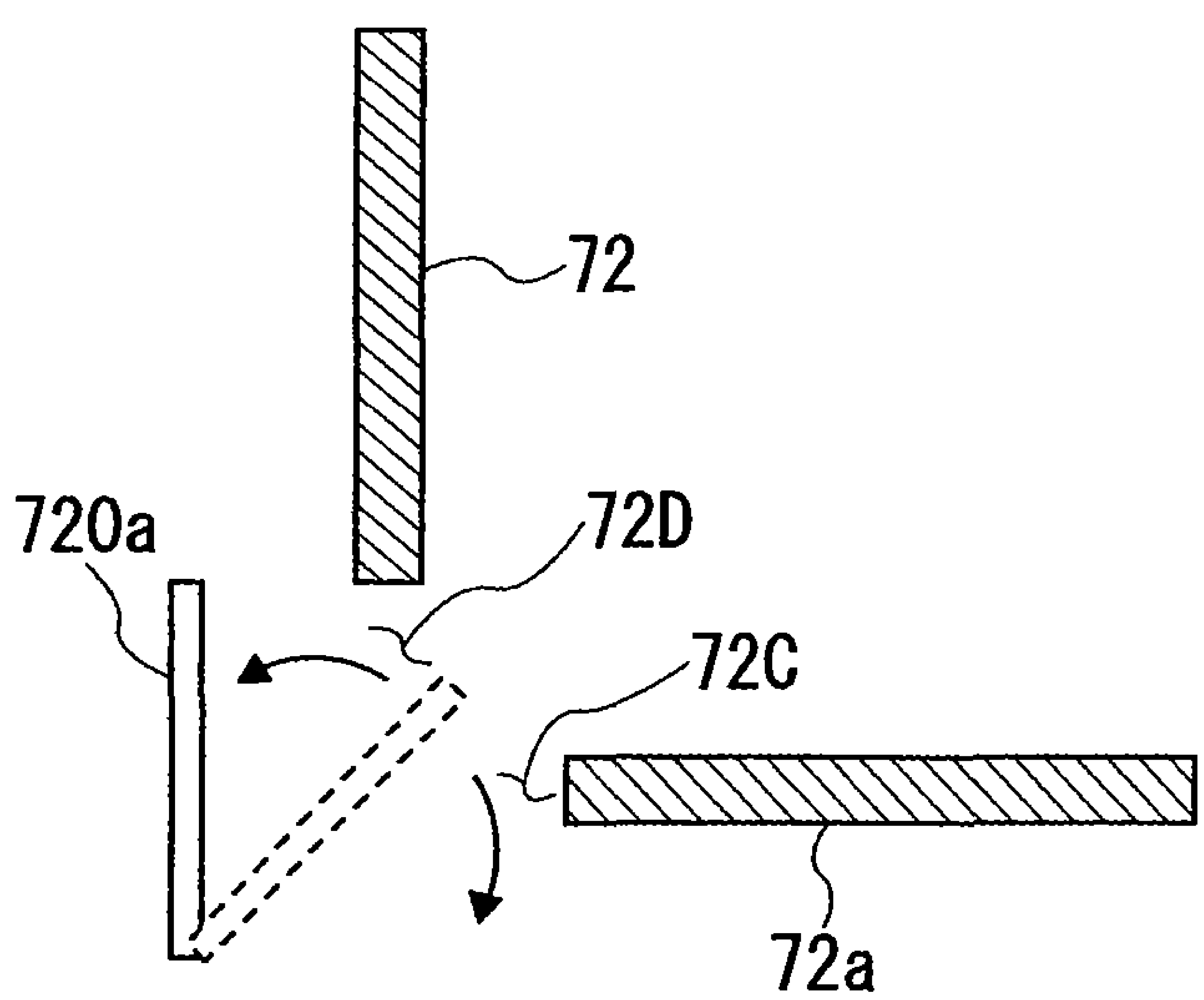


FIG. 27C

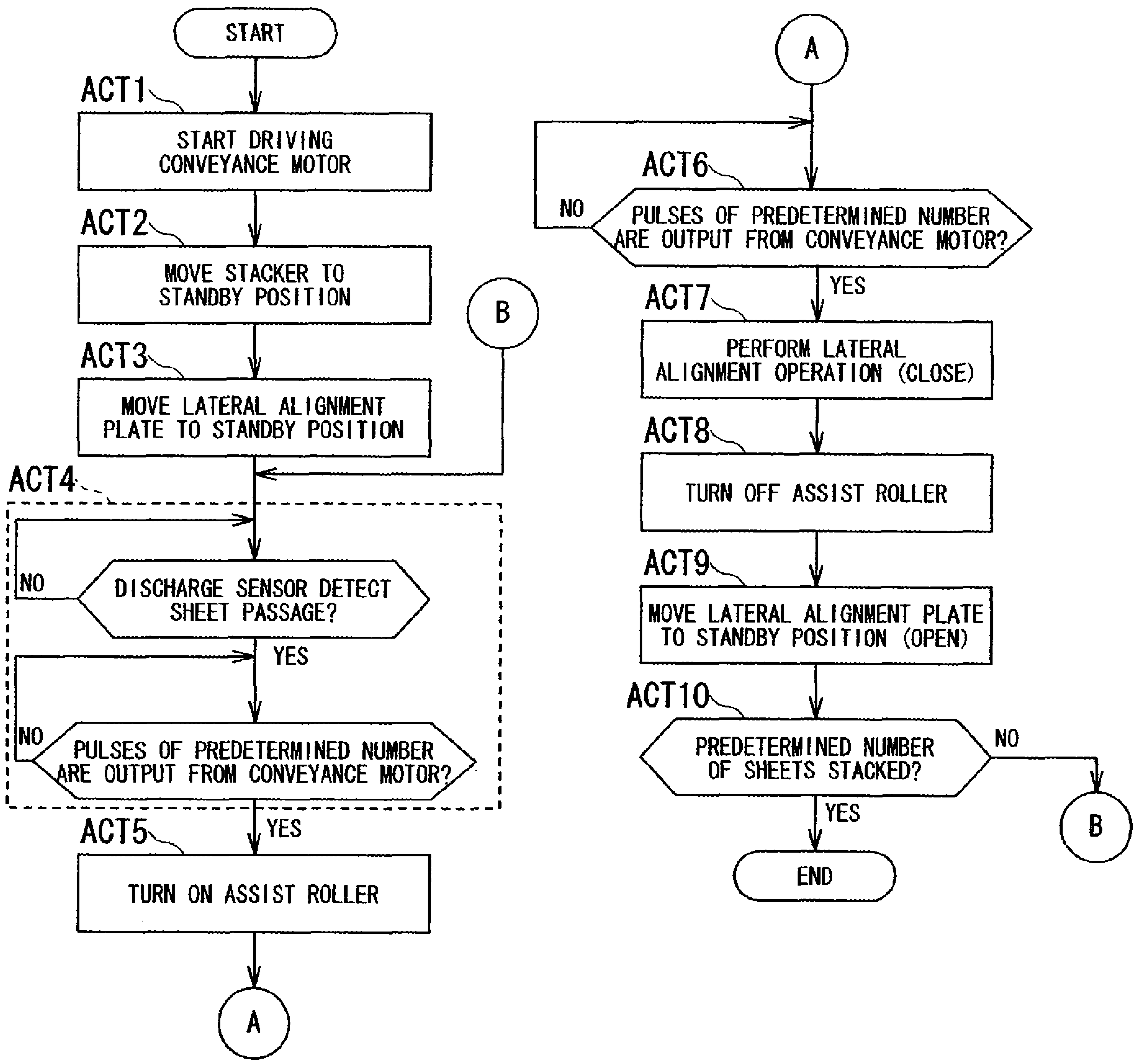

START
ACT1
START DRIVING CONVEYANCE MOTOR
ACT2
MOVE STACKER TO STANDBY POSITION
ACT3
MOVE LATERAL ALIGNMENT PLATE TO STANDBY POSITION
B
ACT4
NO
DISCHARGE SENSOR DETECT SHEET PASSAGE?
YES
NO
PULSES OF PREDETERMINED NUMBER ARE OUTPUT FROM CONVEYANCE MOTOR?
ACT5
YES
TURN ON ASSIST ROLLER
A
A
ACT6
NO
PULSES OF PREDETERMINED NUMBER ARE OUTPUT FROM CONVEYANCE MOTOR?
YES
ACT7
PERFORM LATERAL ALIGNMENT OPERATION (CLOSE)
ACT8
TURN OFF ASSIST ROLLER
ACT9
MOVE LATERAL ALIGNMENT PLATE TO STANDBY POSITION (OPEN)
ACT10
PREDETERMINED NUMBER OF SHEETS STACKED?
NO
B
YES
END

FIG. 28

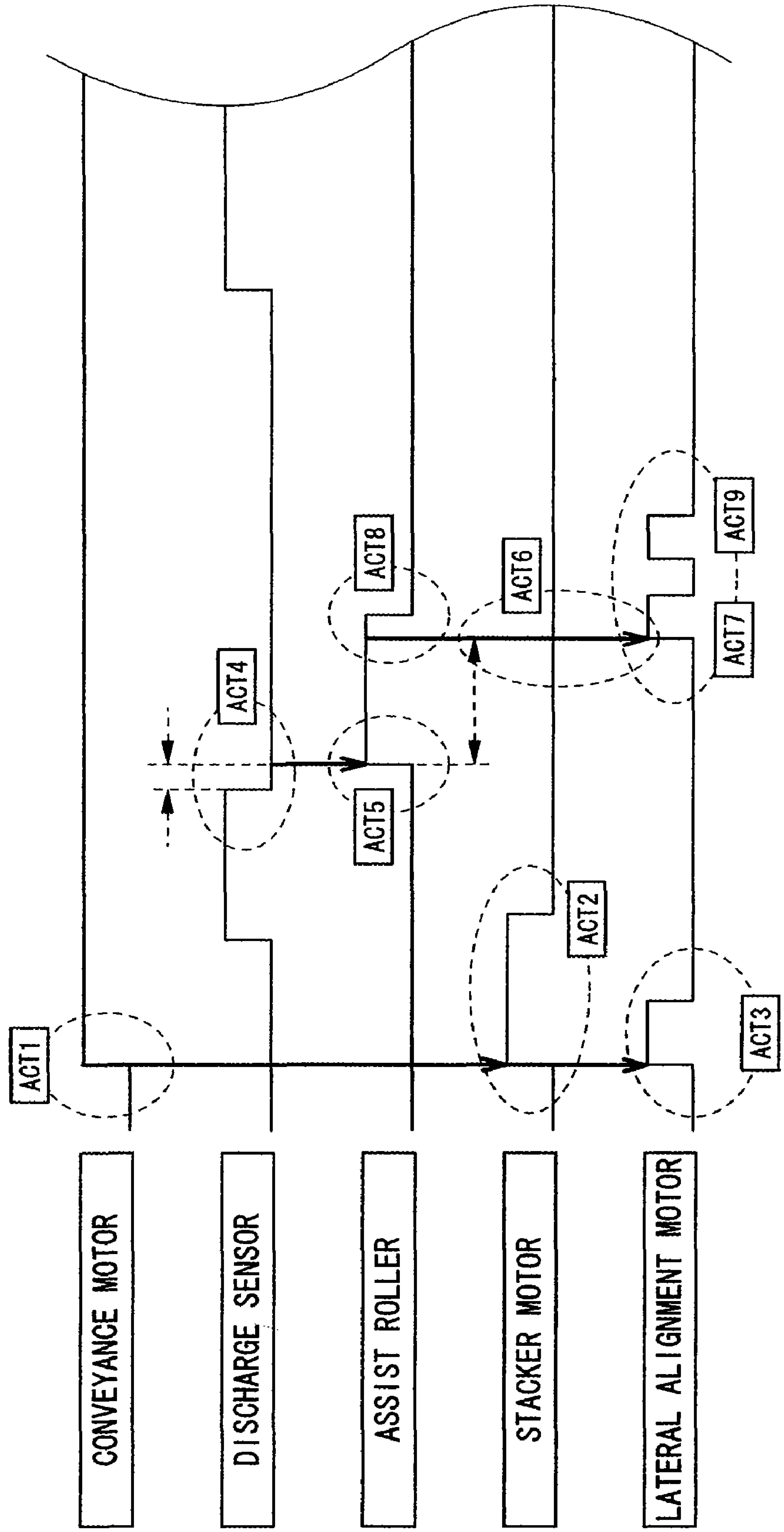

CONVEYANCE MOTOR
DISCHARGE SENSOR
ASSIST ROLLER
STACKER MOTOR
LATERAL ALIGNMENT MOTOR
ACT1
ACT2
ACT3
ACT4
ACT5
ACT6
ACT7
ACT8
ACT9

FIG. 29

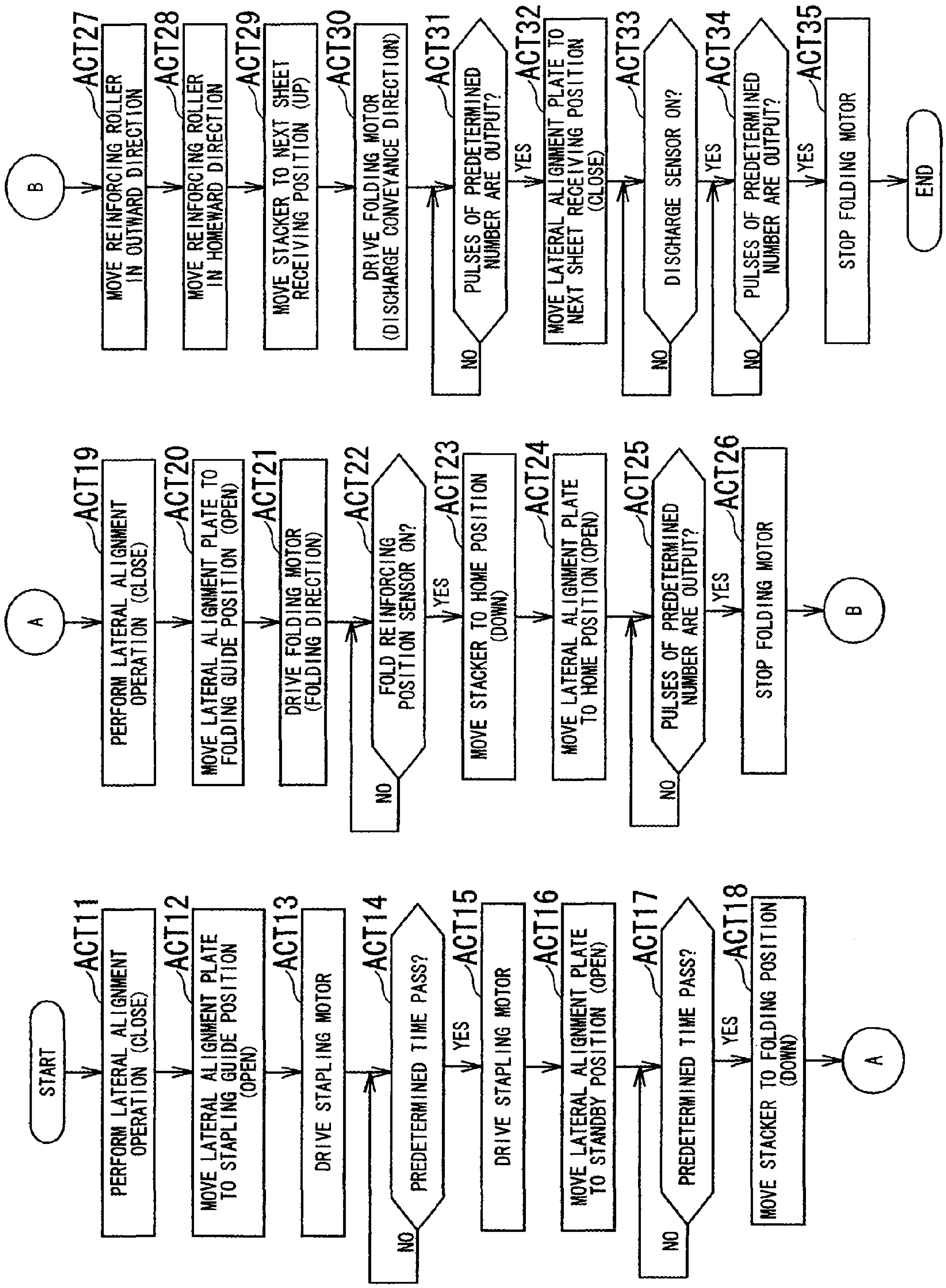

START
ACT11
PERFORM LATERAL ALIGNMENT OPERATION (CLOSE)
ACT12
MOVE LATERAL ALIGNMENT PLATE TO STAPLING GUIDE POSITION (OPEN)
ACT13
DRIVE STAPLING MOTOR
ACT14
PREDETERMINED TIME PASS?
NO
YES
ACT15
DRIVE STAPLING MOTOR
ACT16
MOVE LATERAL ALIGNMENT PLATE TO STANDBY POSITION (OPEN)
ACT17
PREDETERMINED TIME PASS?
NO
YES
ACT18
MOVE STACKER TO FOLDING POSITION (DOWN)
A
A
ACT19
PERFORM LATERAL ALIGNMENT OPERATION (CLOSE)
ACT20
MOVE LATERAL ALIGNMENT PLATE TO FOLDING GUIDE POSITION (OPEN)
ACT21
DRIVE FOLDING MOTOR (FOLDING DIRECTION)
ACT22
FOLD REINFORCING POSITION SENSOR ON?
NO
YES
ACT23
MOVE STACKER TO HOME POSITION (DOWN)
ACT24
MOVE LATERAL ALIGNMENT PLATE TO HOME POSITION (OPEN)
ACT25
PULSES OF PREDETERMINED NUMBER ARE OUTPUT?
NO
YES
ACT26
STOP FOLDING MOTOR
B
B
ACT27
MOVE REINFORCING ROLLER IN OUTWARD DIRECTION
ACT28
MOVE REINFORCING ROLLER IN HOMEWARD DIRECTION
ACT29
MOVE STACKER TO NEXT SHEET RECEIVING POSITION (UP)
ACT30
DRIVE FOLDING MOTOR (DISCHARGE CONVEYANCE DIRECTION)
ACT31
PULSES OF PREDETERMINED NUMBER ARE OUTPUT?
NO
YES
ACT32
MOVE LATERAL ALIGNMENT PLATE TO NEXT SHEET RECEIVING POSITION (CLOSE)
ACT33
DISCHARGE SENSOR ON?
NO
YES
ACT34
PULSES OF PREDETERMINED NUMBER ARE OUTPUT?
NO
YES
ACT35
STOP FOLDING MOTOR
END

FIG. 30

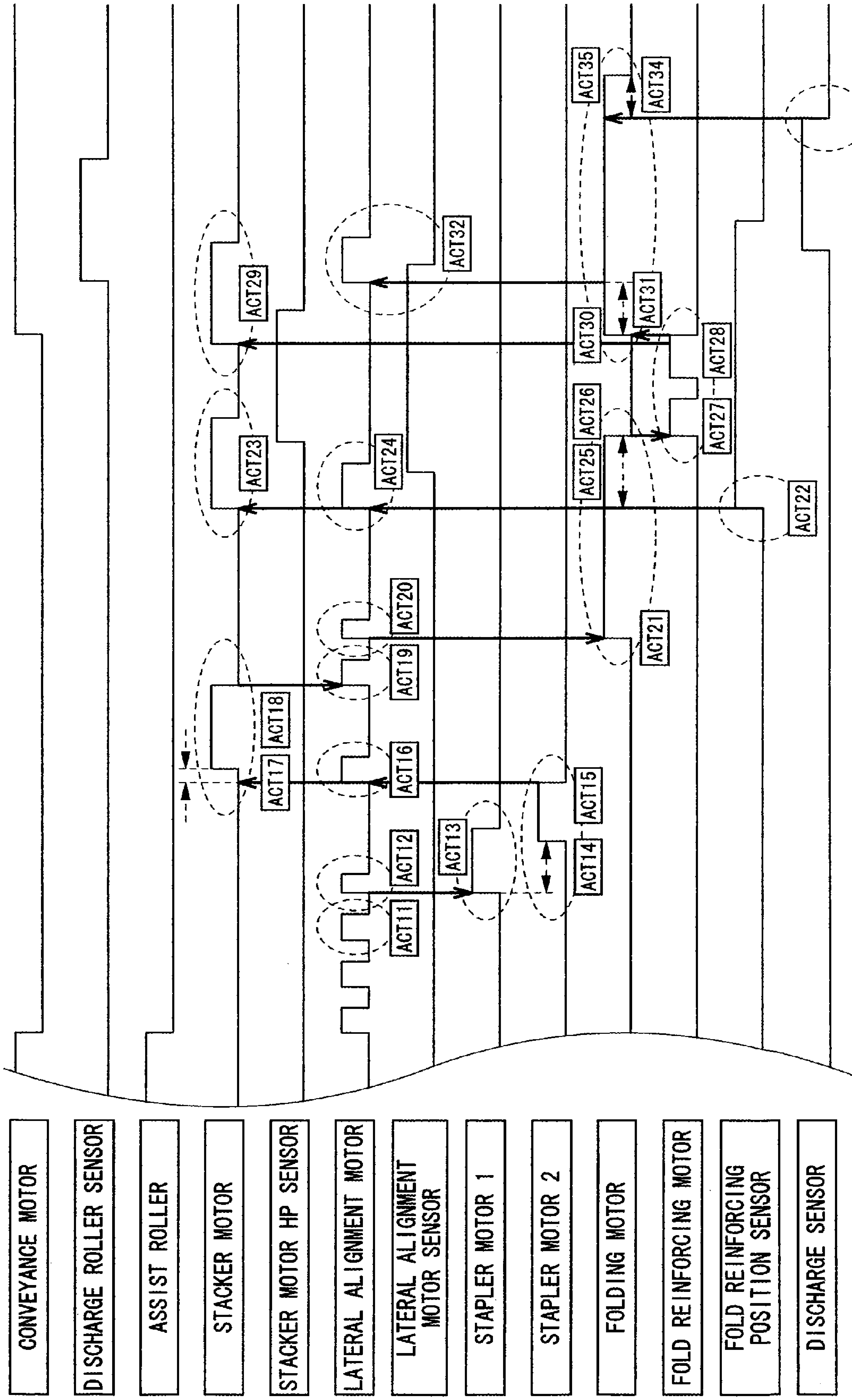
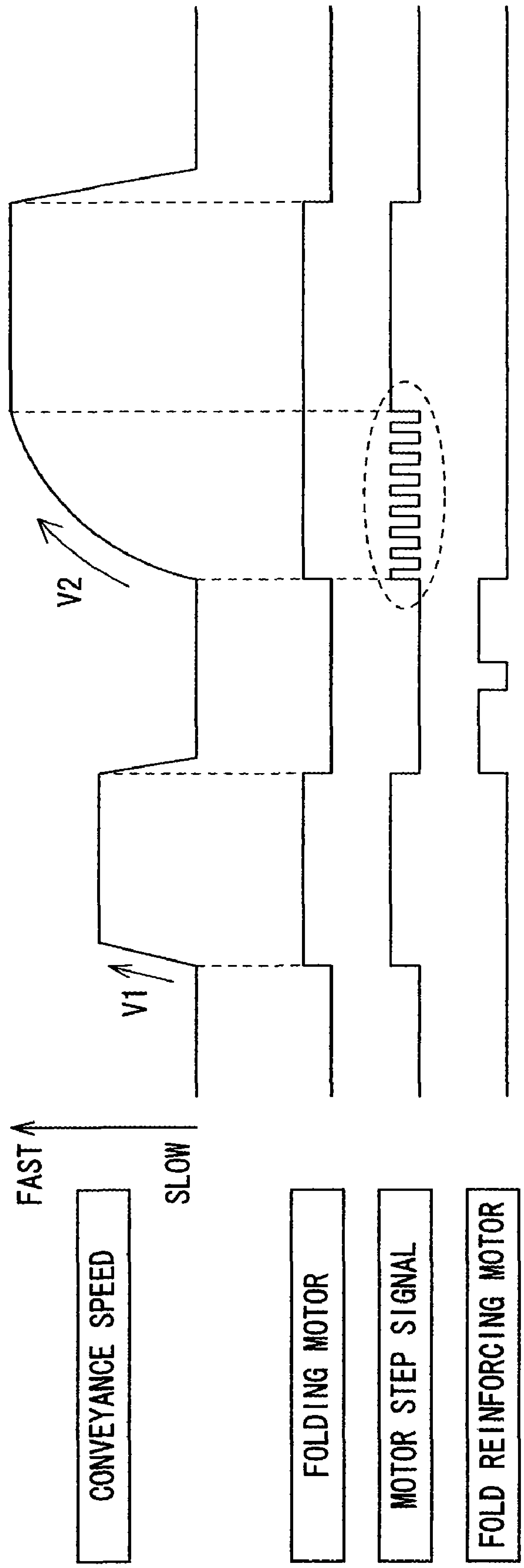

CONVEYANCE MOTOR
DISCHARGE ROLLER SENSOR
ASSIST ROLLER
STACKER MOTOR
STACKER MOTOR HP SENSOR
LATERAL ALIGNMENT MOTOR
LATERAL ALIGNMENT MOTOR SENSOR
STAPLER MOTOR 1
STAPLER MOTOR 2
FOLDING MOTOR
FOLD REINFORCING MOTOR
FOLD REINFORCING POSITION SENSOR
DISCHARGE SENSOR
ACT11
ACT12
ACT13
ACT14
ACT15
ACT16
ACT17
ACT18
ACT19
ACT20
ACT21
ACT22
ACT23
ACT24
ACT25
ACT26
ACT27
ACT28
ACT29
ACT30
ACT31
ACT32
ACT33
ACT34
ACT35

FIG. 31



CONVEYANCE SPEED
FAST
SLOW
V1
V2
FOLDING MOTOR
MOTOR STEP SIGNAL
FOLD REINFORCING MOTOR

FIG. 32

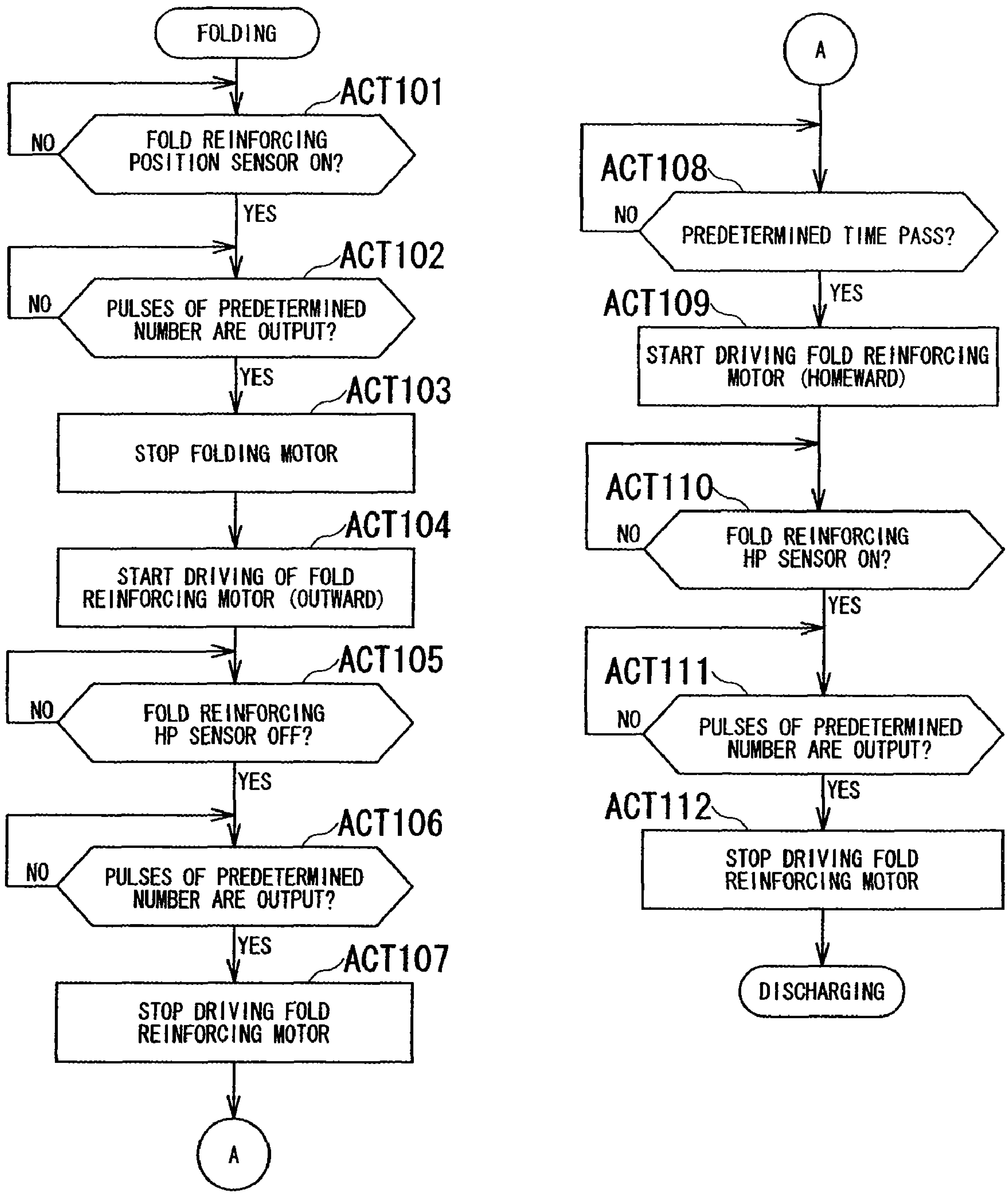

FOLDING
ACT101
FOLD REINFORCING POSITION SENSOR ON?
NO
YES
ACT102
PULSES OF PREDETERMINED NUMBER ARE OUTPUT?
NO
YES
ACT103
STOP FOLDING MOTOR
ACT104
START DRIVING OF FOLD REINFORCING MOTOR (OUTWARD)
ACT105
FOLD REINFORCING HP SENSOR OFF?
NO
YES
ACT106
PULSES OF PREDETERMINED NUMBER ARE OUTPUT?
NO
YES
ACT107
STOP DRIVING FOLD REINFORCING MOTOR
A
A
ACT108
PREDETERMINED TIME PASS?
NO
YES
ACT109
START DRIVING FOLD REINFORCING MOTOR (HOMEWARD)
ACT110
FOLD REINFORCING HP SENSOR ON?
NO
YES
ACT111
PULSES OF PREDETERMINED NUMBER ARE OUTPUT?
NO
YES
ACT112
STOP DRIVING FOLD REINFORCING MOTOR
DISCHARGING

FIG. 33

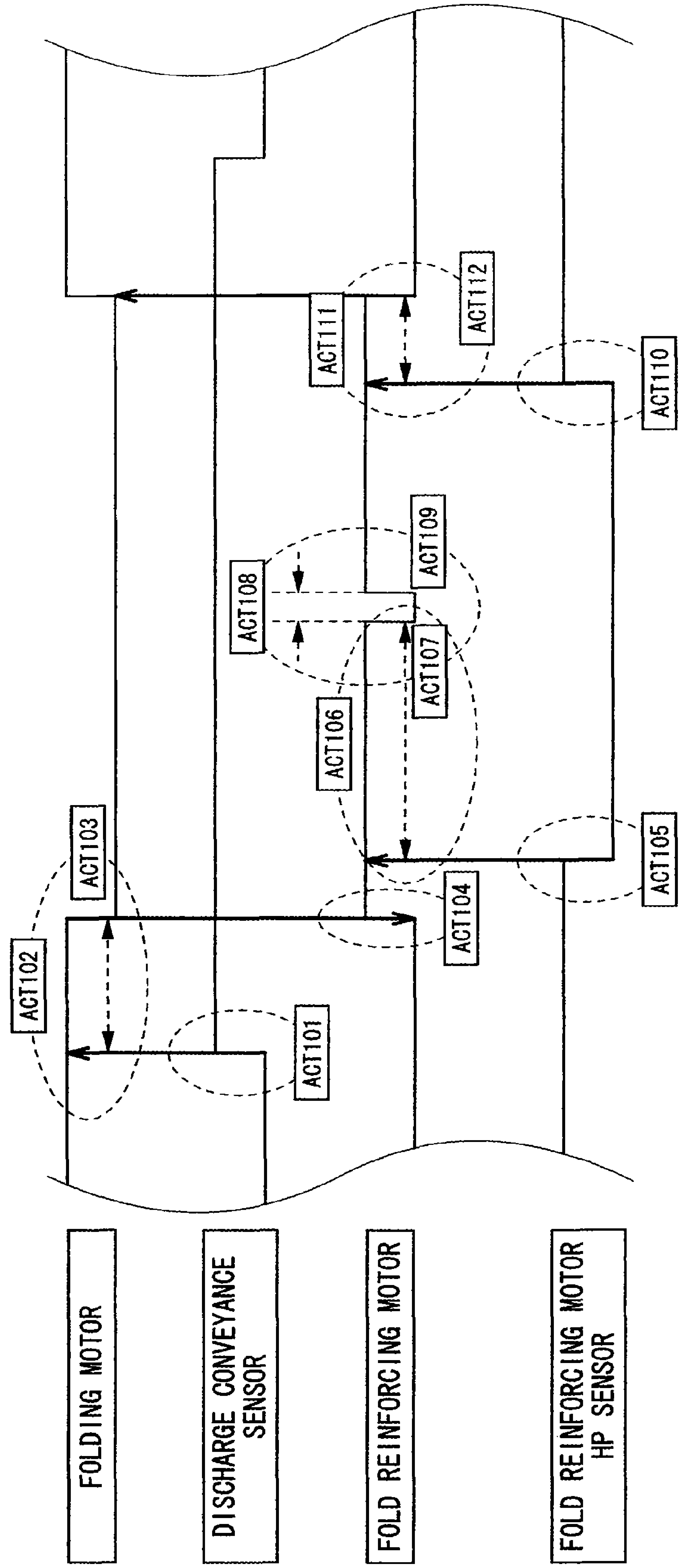

FOLDING MOTOR
DISCHARGE CONVEYANCE SENSOR
FOLD REINFORCING MOTOR
FOLD REINFORCING MOTOR HP SENSOR
ACT101
ACT102
ACT103
ACT104
ACT105
ACT106
ACT107
ACT108
ACT109
ACT110
ACT111
ACT112

FIG. 34

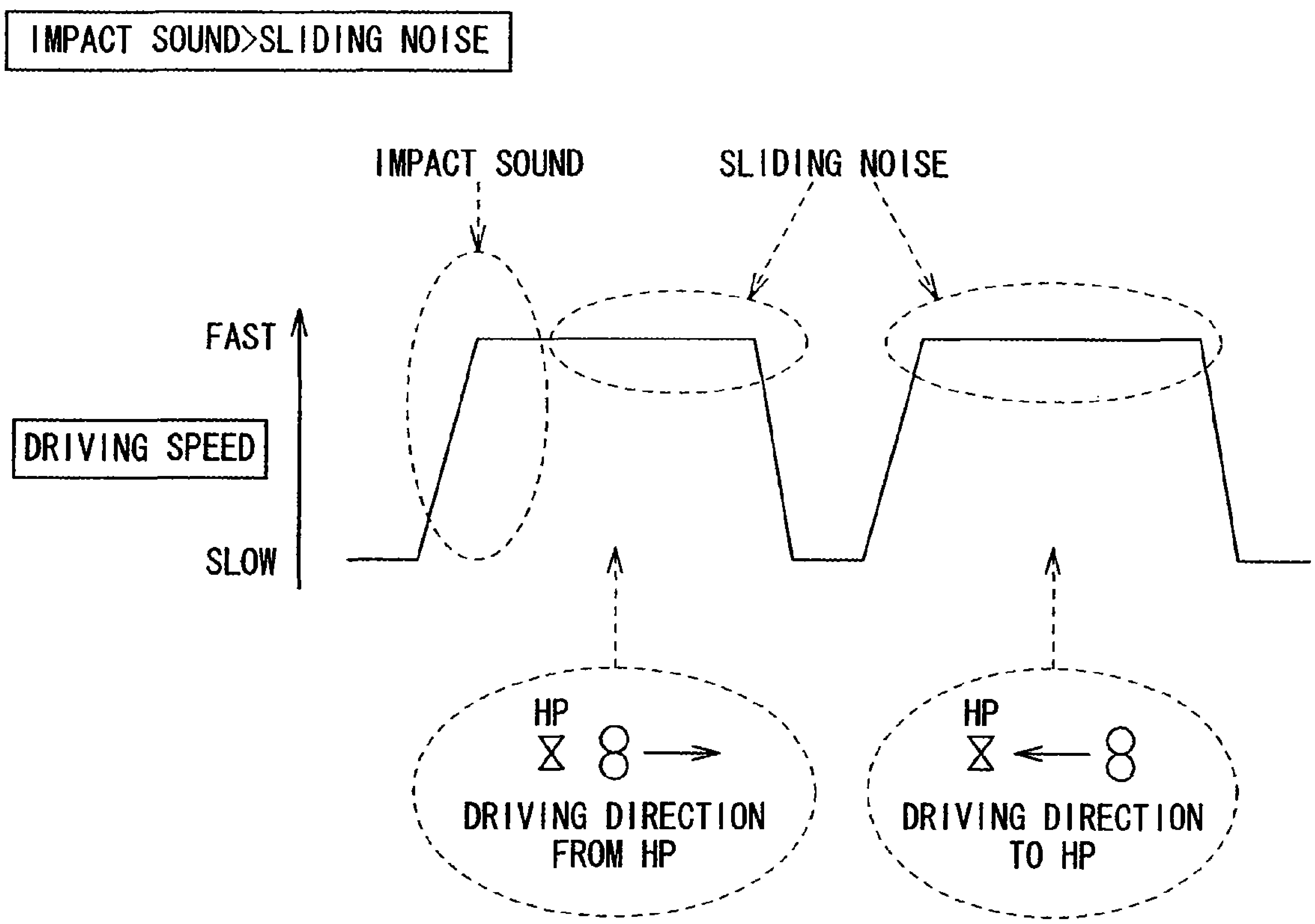

IMPACT SOUND>SLIDING NOISE
IMPACT SOUND
SLIDING NOISE
FAST
DRIVING SPEED
SLOW
HP
DRIVING DIRECTION FROM HP
HP
DRIVING DIRECTION TO HP

FIG. 35

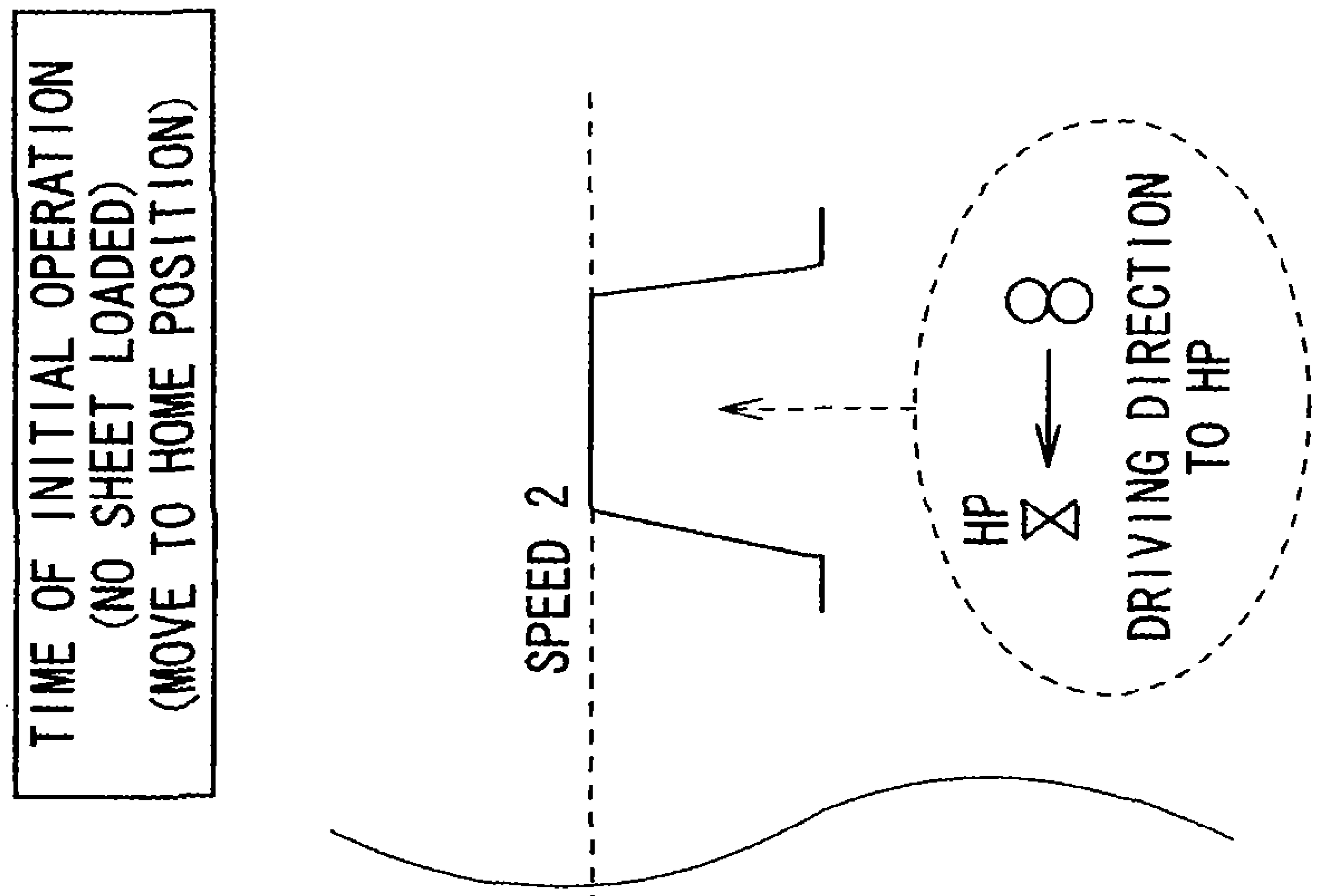


FIG. 36B

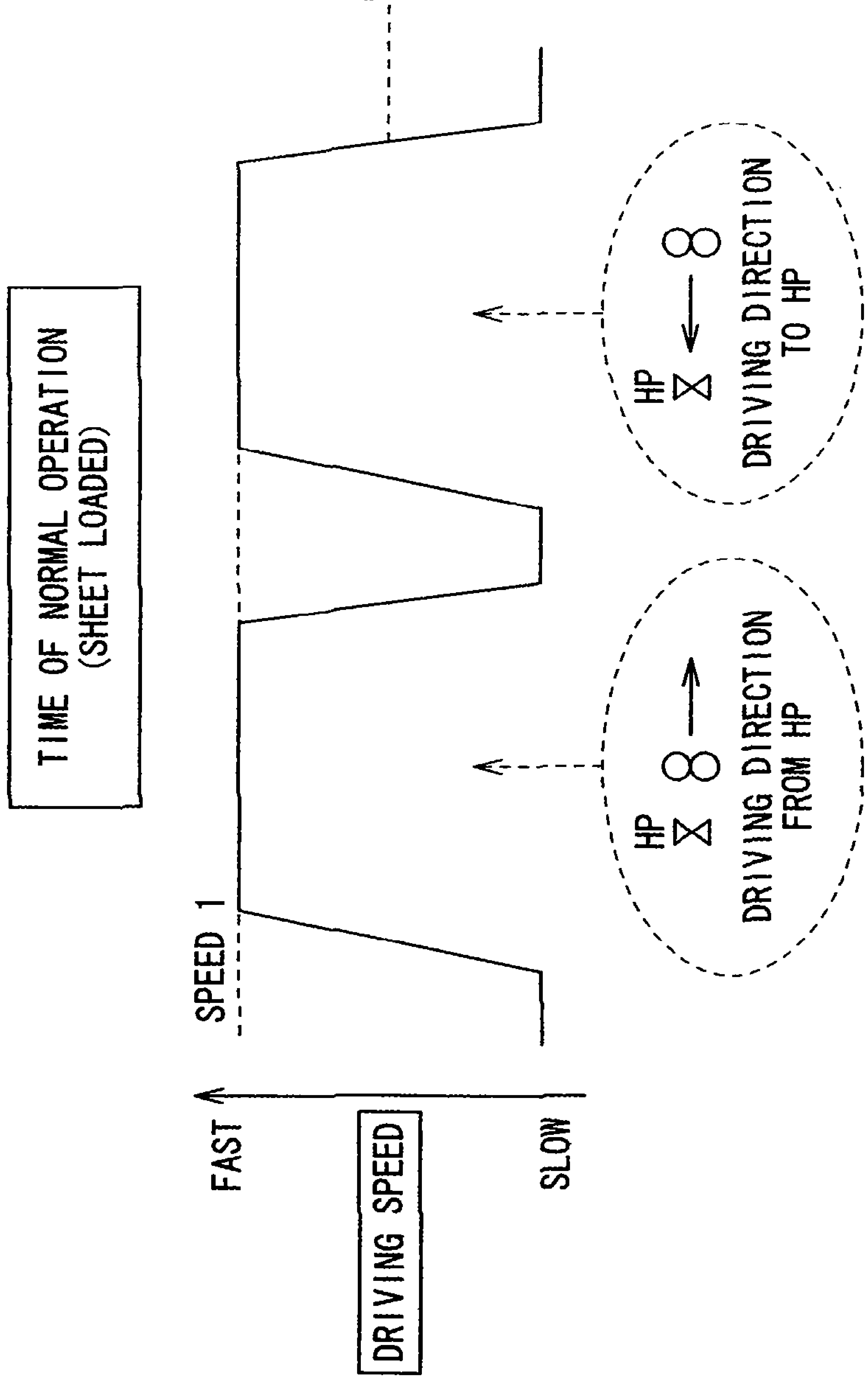


FIG. 36A

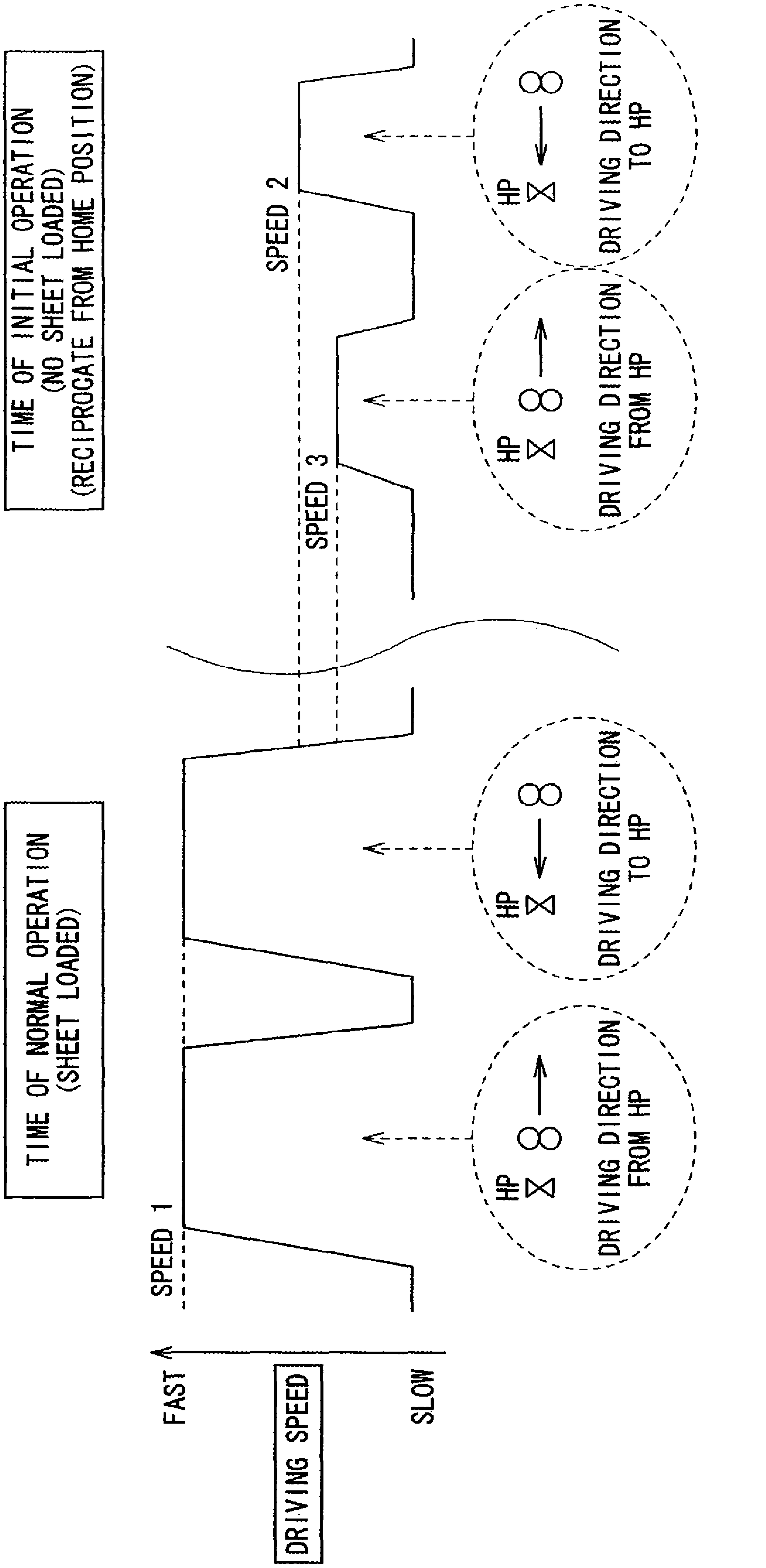


FIG. 37A

FIG. 37B

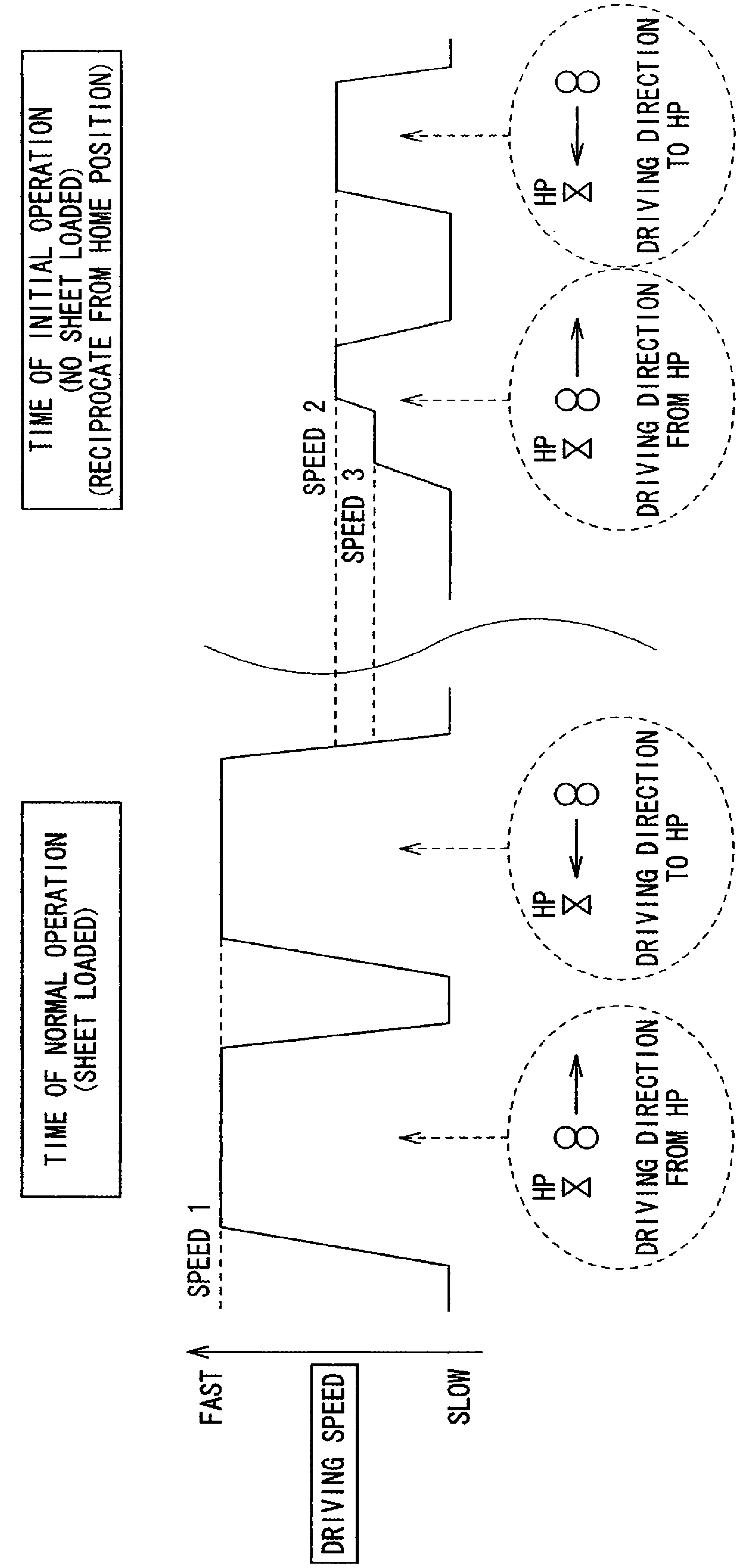


FIG. 38A

FIG. 38B

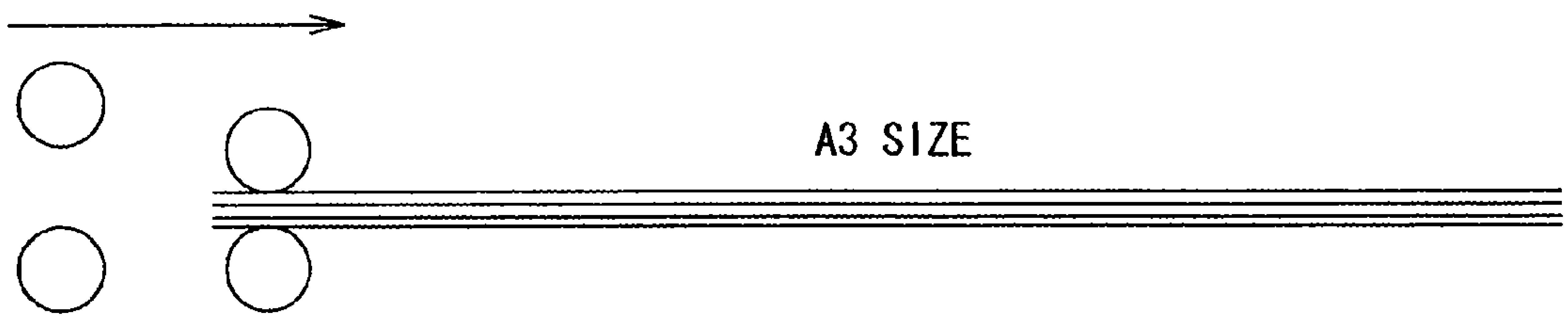


FIG. 39A

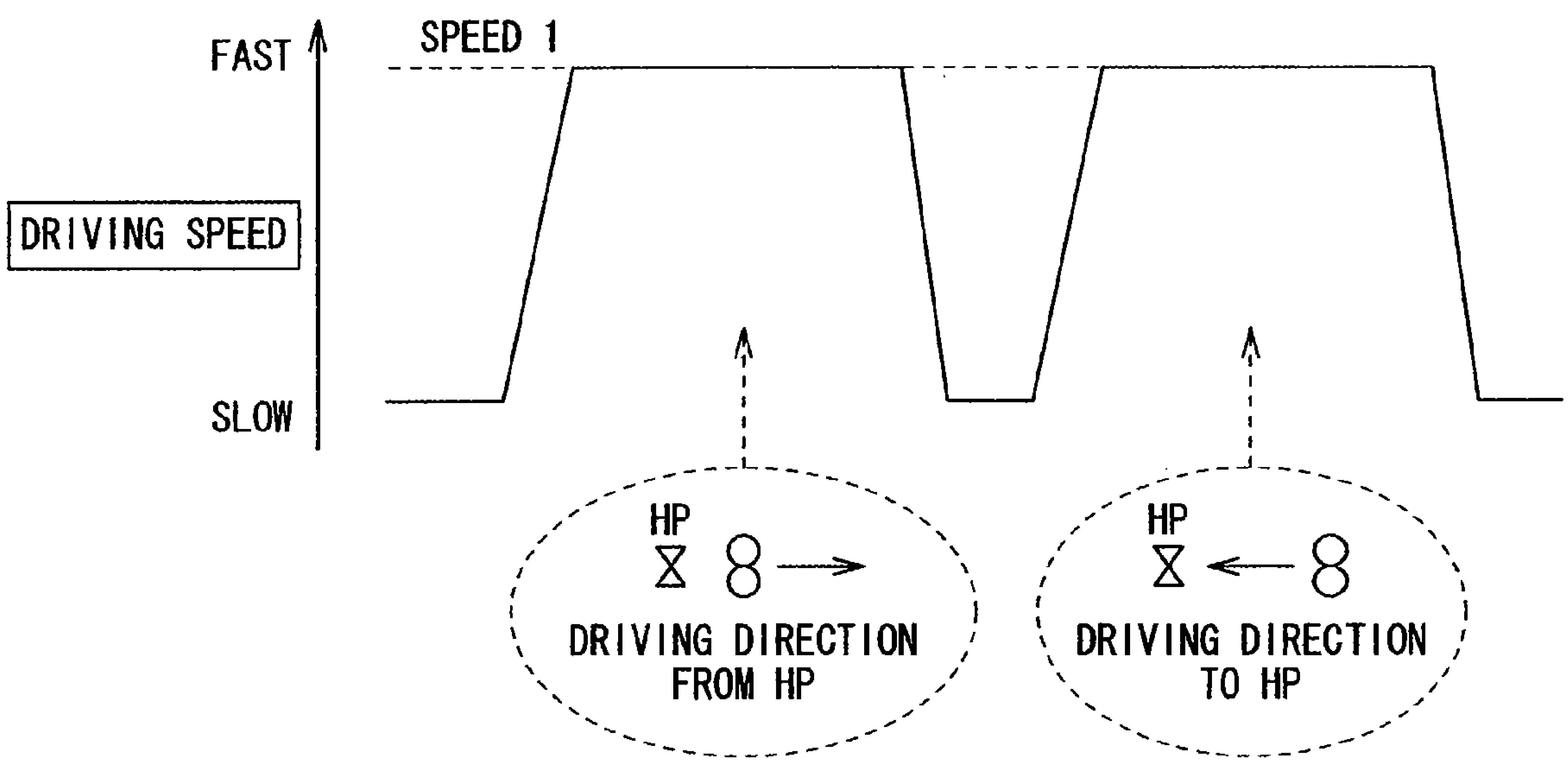


FIG. 39B

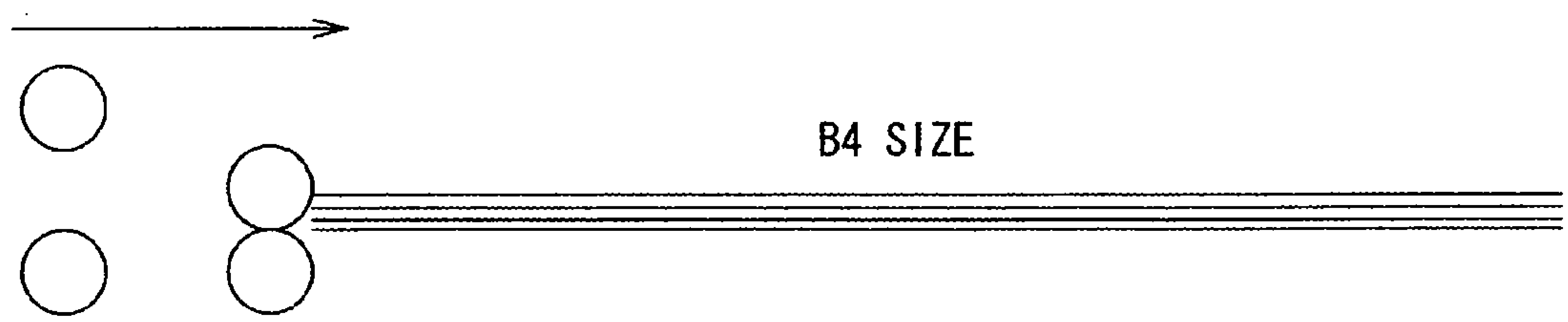


FIG. 40A

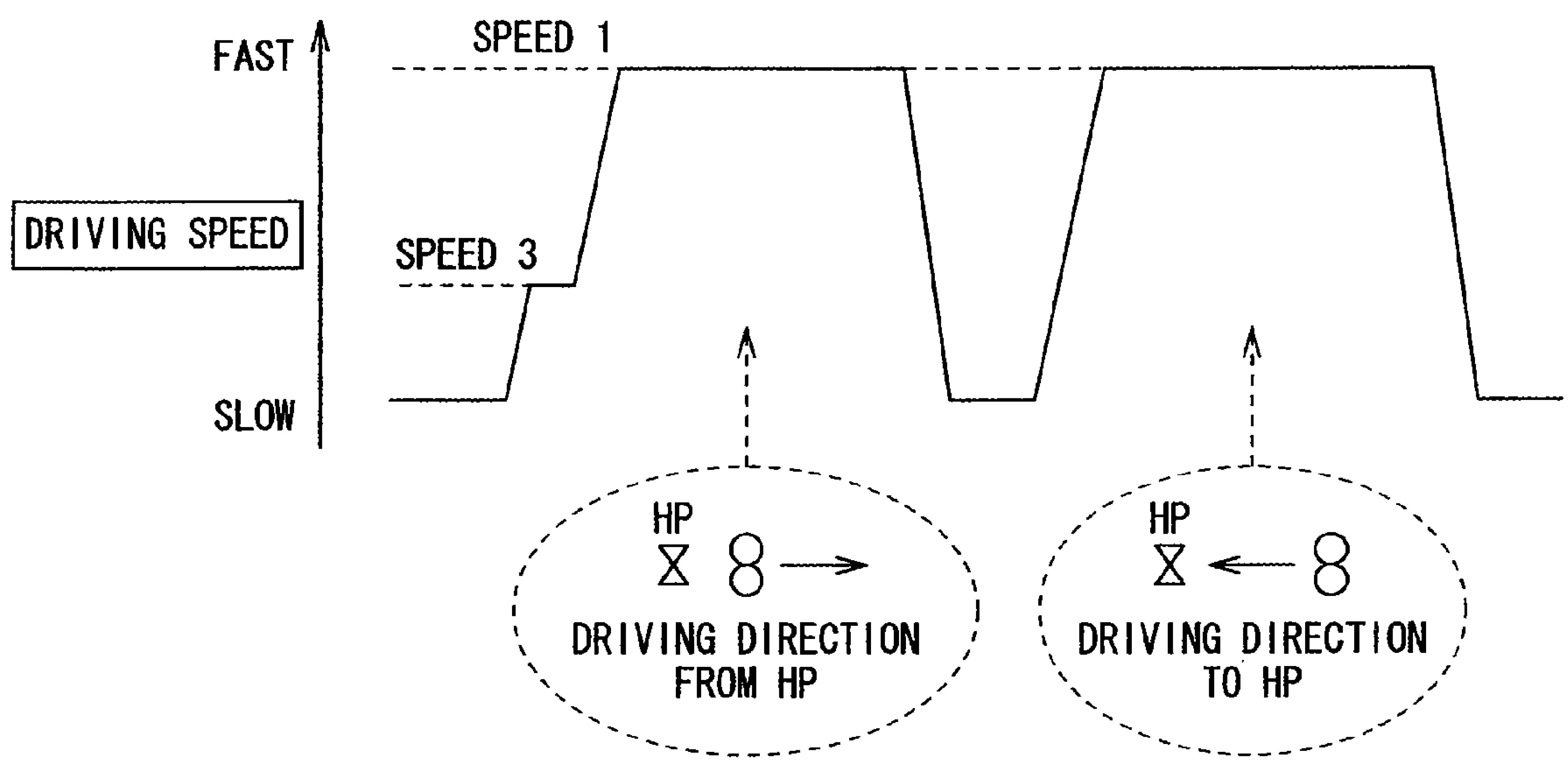


FIG. 40B

FIG. 41A

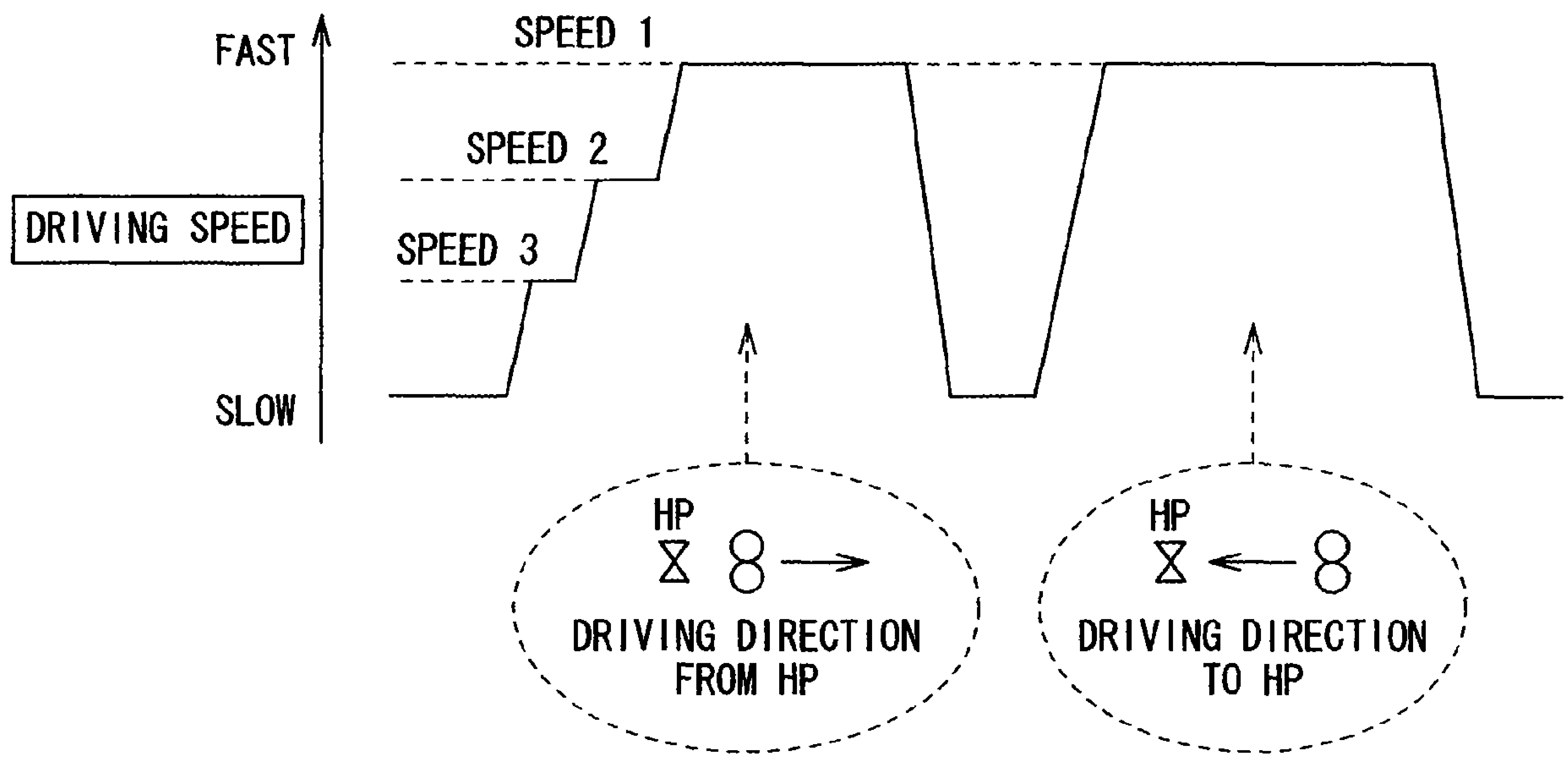


FIG. 41B

SHEET FOLDING APPARATUS, IMAGE FORMING APPARATUS USING THE SAME, AND SHEET FOLDING METHOD

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application is based upon and claims the benefit of priority from: U.S. provisional applications 61/027,138 filed on Feb. 8, 2008, and 61/028,444 filed on Feb. 13, 2008, the entire contents of each of which are incorporated herein by reference.

TECHNICAL FIELD

Disclosed herein relates to a sheet folding apparatus, an image forming apparatus using the sheet folding apparatus, and a sheet folding method, and more particularly, to a sheet folding apparatus stitching and folding printed sheets, an image forming apparatus using the sheet folding apparatus, and a sheet folding method.

BACKGROUND

Hitherto, a sheet finisher is known which is disposed downstream of an image forming apparatus such as a copier, a printer, or a multi-function peripheral (MFP) and performs finishing such as punching or stitching on printed sheets.

Recently, functions of a sheet folding apparatus has been diversified, and the sheet folding apparatus (the sheet finisher) has been developed suggested which has, in addition to the punching and stitching functions, a folding function of folding a part of a sheet and a saddle-stitching and folding function of stitching the center of a sheet with staples and then folding the sheet at the center (see JP-A-2004-106991, JP-A-2003-182928, etc.).

The sheet folding apparatus having the saddle-stitching and folding function can form a booklet (bind a book) from plural printed sheets.

In the saddle-stitching and folding suggested hitherto, the center of sheets is stitched with staples or the like and then the stitched portion is creased and folded by a pair of rollers called folding rollers. At this time, a plate-like member called a folding blade is applied to the stitched portion of the sheet bundle and is pushed into a nip of the folding roller pair to crease the sheet bundle.

However, a time when the folded portion of the sheet bundle is pressed by the nip of the folding rollers is short and the entire folded portion is simultaneously pressed by the nip of the folding rollers. Accordingly, the pressure is dispersed to the entire fold. Thus, the fold formed by the folding rollers is a fold to which a sufficient pressure is not applied. Particularly, when the number of sheets is large or when the sheet bundle includes a thick sheet, an incomplete fold is often formed.

In order to deal with this problem, JP-A-2004-106991 or JP-A-2003-182928 discloses a technique of separately providing a roller called a fold reinforcing roller and reinforcing the fold formed by the folding rollers with the fold reinforcing roller.

In the technique disclosed in JP-A-2004-106991 or JP-A-2003-182928, the sheet bundle pushed out from the folding rollers is temporarily stopped on a guide plate and the fold reinforcing roller is made to move along the fold while applying a pressure from above to the fold of the sheet bundle. The fold nipped between the guide plate and the fold reinforcing roller is reinforced by the pressure generated between the guide plate and the fold reinforcing roller.

In addition, JP-A-2003-182928 discloses a technique of making a moving speed of the fold reinforcing roller variable depending on the number of sheets to be processed.

However, in the technique disclosed in JP-A-2004-106991 or JP-A-2003-182928, since the pressure is applied to the fold between the fold reinforcing roller and the plane guide plate, it is anticipated that the pressing force of the fold reinforcing roller is diffused by the plane guide plate and thus the pressure to reinforce the fold is not effectively applied to the fold.

A method is conceivable in which a fold in the nip of a pair of fold reinforcing rollers is reinforced by allowing the pair of fold reinforcing rollers to move along the fold with the fold interposed therebetween while applying a pressure to the nip. In this method, since the force of pressing the pair of fold reinforcing rollers to each other can be concentrated on one point of the nip, the high pressure can be generated at the nip, thereby more effectively reinforcing the fold.

Specifically, one fold reinforcing roller (first roller) of the pair can be made to freely rotate in a state where the position is fixed in the thickness direction of a sheet bundle. Meanwhile, the other fold reinforcing roller (second roller) of the pair can be made to freely rotate similarly to the first roller, and can be made to move in the thickness direction while applying an urging force by an elastic member such as a spring in the thickness direction of the sheet bundle.

By applying a strong urging force to the first and second rollers, it is possible to form an excellent fold sharp and not unfolded again.

However, since the urging force applied to the first and second rollers is strong, an impact sound not negligible is generated when the first and second rollers come in contact with each other in an area not having the sheet bundle or when the first and second rollers come in contact with each other in a state where no sheet bundle exists such as in an initial operation.

SUMMARY

An aspect of the disclosure is a sheet folding apparatus including: a saddle-stitching unit configured to stitch a center of a sheet bundle; a folding unit configured to fold the sheet bundle at the center to form a fold; a loading base onto which the sheet bundle conveyed from the folding unit is loaded; a nipping plate configured to be pressed to and separated from the loading base in parallel to the loading base and to nip the sheet bundle loaded onto the loading base; and first and second rollers that move along a direction of the fold while nipping and pressing the fold of the sheet bundle nipped by the nipping plate to reinforce the fold. Here, a surface, which faces the loading base, of the nipping plate is provided with an elastic member.

Another aspect of the disclosure is an image forming apparatus including: a reading section reading an original document and generating image data; an image forming section printing the image data on a sheet; a saddle-stitching unit configured to stitch a center of a sheet bundle; a folding unit configured to fold the sheet bundle at the center to form a fold; a loading base onto which the sheet bundle conveyed from the folding unit is loaded; a nipping plate configured to be pressed to and separated from the loading base in parallel to the loading base and to nip the sheet bundle loaded onto the loading base; and first and second rollers that move along a direction of the fold while nipping and pressing the fold of the sheet bundle nipped by the nipping plate to reinforce the fold.

Here, a surface, which faces the loading base, of the nipping plate is provided with an elastic member.

Still another aspect of the disclosure a sheet folding method including: stitching a center of a sheet bundle; folding the sheet bundle at the center to form a fold; loading the sheet bundle conveyed from the folding unit onto a loading base; pressing a nipping plate, a surface of which facing the loading base is provided with an elastic member, against the loading base in parallel to the loading base and nipping the sheet bundle loaded onto the loading base; and nipping and pressing the fold of the sheet bundle nipped by the nipping plate by the use of first and second rollers and allowing the first and second rollers to move along a direction of the fold to reinforce the fold.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

In the accompanying drawings,

FIG. **1** is a perspective view illustrating an appearance of an image forming apparatus;

FIG. **2** is a sectional view illustrating a configuration of the image forming apparatus;

FIG. **3** is a sectional view illustrating a configuration of a sheet folding apparatus;

FIG. **4** is an enlarged sectional view illustrating a part of the sheet folding apparatus;

FIGS. **5**A and **5**B are a front view and a plan view illustrating a configuration of a lateral alignment unit, respectively;

FIGS. **6**A and **6**B are diagrams illustrating a control position of a lateral alignment plate;

FIG. **7** is a perspective view illustrating a positional relation of a stack tray and a stack click;

FIG. **8** is a perspective view illustrating a configuration of a stacker;

FIG. **9** is a perspective view illustrating a configuration of a folding unit;

FIG. **10** is a first diagram illustrating a configuration of a folding unit driving mechanism;

FIG. **11** is a second diagram illustrating the configuration of the folding unit driving mechanism;

FIG. **12** is a first diagram illustrating a driving force transmitting path of the folding unit;

FIG. **13** is a second diagram illustrating the driving force transmitting path of the folding unit;

FIG. **14** is a perspective appearance view illustrating the entire structure of a fold reinforcing unit;

FIGS. **15**A and **15**B are sectional views schematically illustrating a structure of a supporting section;

FIG. **16** is a perspective appearance view illustrating a structure of a roller unit;

FIG. **17** is a diagram illustrating the fold reinforcing unit as viewed from a conveyance destination of a sheet bundle;

FIG. **18** is a diagram illustrating an effective driving range of the roller unit;

FIG. **19** is a first diagram illustrating a mechanism for vertically driving an upper roller.

FIG. **20** is a second diagram illustrating the mechanism for vertically driving the upper roller.

FIG. **21** is a first diagram illustrating a driving structure used to vertically drive a conveyance guide;

FIG. **22** is a second diagram illustrating the driving structure used to vertically drive the conveyance guide;

FIGS. **23**A to **23**D are diagrams schematically illustrating the movement of the vertical driving structure of the conveyance guide;

FIG. **24** is a diagram illustrating a positional relation of components around the roller unit;

FIG. **25** is a first diagram illustrating an elastic member disposed in a nipping plate;

FIG. **26** is a second diagram illustrating the elastic member disposed in the nipping plate;

FIGS. **27**A to **27**C are diagrams illustrating a notch formed in the nipping plate;

FIG. **28** is a flowchart illustrating an example of an operation sequence of piling and receiving sheets in a stack tray;

FIG. **29** is a timing diagram illustrating ON and OFF states of the units associated with the operation sequence shown in FIG. **28**;

FIG. **30** is a flowchart illustrating an example of an operation sequence of saddle-stitching and folding;

FIG. **31** is a timing diagram illustrating ON and OFF states of the units associated with the operation sequence shown in FIG. **30**;

FIG. **32** is a diagram illustrating details of a driving control of a folding motor;

FIG. **33** is a flowchart illustrating an example of an operation sequence of fold reinforcing;

FIG. **34** is a timing diagram illustrating ON and OFF states of the units associated with the operation sequence shown in FIG. **33**;

FIG. **35** is a diagram illustrating a speed control of the roller unit in normal operation;

FIGS. **36**A and **36**B are diagrams illustrating a first example of the speed control of the roller unit in a state where no sheet bundle exists;

FIGS. **37**A and **37**B are diagrams illustrating a second example of the speed control of the roller unit in a state where no sheet bundle exists;

FIGS. **38**A and **38**B are diagrams illustrating a third example of the speed control of the roller unit in a state where no sheet bundle exists;

FIGS. **39**A and **39**B are diagrams illustrating the speed control of the roller unit when the size of the sheet bundle is large;

FIGS. **40**A and **40**B are diagrams illustrating the speed control of the roller unit when the size of the sheet bundle is middle; and

FIGS. **41**A and **41**B are diagrams illustrating the speed control of the roller unit when the size of the sheet bundle is small.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

A sheet folding apparatus, an image forming apparatus, and a sheet folding method will be described with reference to the accompanying drawings.

(1) Configuration of Image Forming Apparatus and Sheet Folding Apparatus

FIG. **1** is an appearance perspective view illustrating a basic configuration of an image forming apparatus **10**. The image forming apparatus **10** includes a reading section **11** reading an original document, an image forming section **12** printing image data of the read original document on a sheet in an electrophotographic manner, and a sheet folding apparatus **30** performing finishing such as sorting, punching, folding, or saddle-stitching on the printed sheet. The image forming section **12** includes an operation section **9** by which a user performs various operations.

FIG. **2** is a sectional view illustrating a detailed configuration of the image forming apparatus **10**.

The image forming section **12** of the image forming apparatus **10** includes a photoconductive drum **1** at the center. A charging unit **2**, an exposure unit **3**, a developing unit **4**, a transfer unit **5**A, a charge removing unit **5**B, a separation pawl **5**C, and a cleaning unit **6** are respectively disposed around the photoconductive drum **1**. Besides, a fixing unit **8** is disposed downstream of the charge removing unit **5**B. An image forming process is performed by these units roughly in the following procedure.

First, the charging unit **2** uniformly charges the surface of the photoconductive drum **1**. An original document read by the reading section **11** is converted into image data and is inputted to the exposure unit **3**. The exposure unit **3** applies a laser beam corresponding to the level of the image data to the photoconductive drum **1** to form an electrostatic latent image on the photoconductive drum **1**. The electrostatic latent image is developed with toner supplied from the developing unit **4** and a toner image is formed on the photoconductive drum **1**.

Meanwhile, a sheet contained in a sheet containing unit **7**A is conveyed to a transfer position (a gap between the photoconductive drum **1** and the transfer unit **5**A) by some conveyance rollers. At the transfer position, the toner image is transferred from the photoconductive drum **1** to the sheet by the transfer unit **5**A. Electric charges on the surface of the sheet to which the toner image is transferred are removed by the charge removing unit **5**B. Then, the sheet goes away from the photoconductive drum **1** by the separation pawl **5**C. Thereafter, the sheet is conveyed by an intermediate conveyance unit **7**B and is heated and pressed by the fixing unit **8** so that the toner image is fixed to the sheet. The sheet subjected to the fixing process is discharged from a discharge section **7**C and is outputted to a sheet finisher **20**.

The cleaning unit **6** located downstream of the separation pawl **5**C removes the developer remaining on the surface of the photoconductive drum **1** and prepares for a next image formation.

When duplex printing is performed, a path of the sheet on the front side of which the toner image is formed is made to branch from a normal discharge path by a conveyance path switching plate **7**D and the sheet is switched back by an inversion conveyance section **7**E to invert the front and back sides. The same printing as a single-side printing is performed on the back side of the inverted sheet and the sheet is outputted to the sheet finisher **20** from the discharge section **7**C.

The sheet finisher **20** includes a sheet folding apparatus **30** and a sheet bundle loading section **41** in addition to a sorter section sorting sheets.

The sheet folding apparatus **30** performs a process of (saddle-stitching) stitching the center of plural printed sheets discharged from the image forming section **12** with staples and then folding the sheets to form a booklet.

The booklet subjected to the saddle-stitching by the sheet folding apparatus **30** is outputted to the sheet bundle loading section **41** and the bound booklet is finally loaded thereon.

FIG. **3** is a sectional view showing a detailed configuration of the sheet folding apparatus **30**. FIG. **4** is an enlarged sectional view illustrating a part of the sheet folding apparatus **30**.

In the sheet folding apparatus **30**, the sheet discharged from the discharge section **7**C of the image forming section **12** is received by an inlet roller pair **31** and is delivered to an intermediate roller pair **32**. The intermediate roller pair **32** further delivers the sheet to an outlet roller pair **33**. The outlet roller pair **33** sends the sheet to a stack tray **34** having an inclined loading surface. The leading edge of the sheet moves to an upper part of the inclination of the stack tray **34**.

As shown in FIG. **4**, an assist roller **332** is disposed at an end of the outlet roller pair **33**.

The sheet folding apparatus **30** includes a conveyance motor **301** (see FIG. **3**). The conveyance motor **301** drives the outlet roller pairs **33** or the assist roller **332** via a timing belt not shown in synchronization with each other.

When the sheet is sent to the stack tray **34**, the assist roller **332** is located at a position indicated by the broken line so as not to interfere with the sending of the sheet.

A discharge sensor **333** is disposed in a conveyance path of a sheet and detects a passage of the leading edge and the trailing edge of the sheet passing through the conveyance path. When the discharge sensor **333** detects the passage of the trailing edge of the sheet, it is determined that the sheet is completely sent to the stack tray **34** in a predetermined time after that time, and the position of the assist roller **332** is made to move in the direction of arrow A around a supporting point P. With this movement, the assist roller **332** comes in contact with the sheet sent to the stack tray **34**.

The assist roller **332** is made to rotate in the direction of arrow C by the conveyance motor **301** and allows the sheet on the stack tray **34** to move down. The surface of the assist roller **332** is covered with a sponge or the like and can allow the sheet to move down without being damaged.

A stacker **35** stands by below the stack tray **34** having a stack pawl **211** and receives the lower edge of the sheet which is pressed down from the upper part of the inclination of the stack tray **34** by the assist roller **332**.

When a subsequent sheet is sent to the stack tray **34**, the assist roller **332** moves back in the direction of arrow B. The reciprocation of the assist roller **332** in the directions of arrow A and arrow B is carried out with a pulling force of a solenoid **334** and a restoring force of a spring coil not shown.

In this way, sheets are sequentially accumulated on the stacker **35**. At this time, a longitudinal alignment of sheets is sequentially carried out with the pressing-down of the assist roller **332**. When the number of sheets reaches the number instructed from the operation section **9**, a lateral alignment is carried out by a lateral alignment unit **40**.

A stapler (saddle-stitching unit) **36** is disposed at the middle of the stack tray **34**. When the sheets are received by the stack tray **34**, the position of the stacker **35** rises up from a standby position S**1** shown in FIG. **4** to a sheet receiving position S**2**. The sheet receiving position S**2** is adjusted so that the position (the center of a sheet bundle in the vertical direction) where the sheet bundle is to be stapled faces the stapler **36**.

When the sheet bundle is saddle-stitched by the stapler **36**, the stacker **35** moves down until the position (the center of the sheet bundle in the vertical direction and the position where staples were driven) where a fold of the sheet bundle is to be formed reaches the front of a folding blade **37** (a folding position S**3** in FIG. **4**).

When the position where the fold is to be formed reaches the front of the folding blade **37**, an end **37***a* of the folding blade **37** pushes the surface which is to be a inner surface of the folded sheet bundle.

A folding roller pair **38** is disposed at the forward of the folding blade **37** in the traveling direction thereof. The sheet bundle pushed by the folding blade **37** is inserted into a nip of the folding roller pair **38** to form a fold at the center of the sheet bundle. The folding unit is constituted by the folding blade **37** and the folding roller pair **38**.

The sheet bundle on which the fold is formed by the folding roller pair **38** is conveyed to a fold reinforcing unit **50** disposed downstream thereof. The sheet bundle conveyed to the fold reinforcing unit **50** is temporarily stopped there.

The fold reinforcing unit **50** includes a fold reinforcing roller pair **51** (an upper roller (second roller) **51***a* and a lower roller (first roller) **51***b*). The fold reinforcing roller pair **51** moves in a direction perpendicular to the conveyance direction of the sheet bundle (direction along the fold) while applying a pressure to the fold, thereby reinforcing the fold.

The sheet bundle of which the fold is reinforced by the fold reinforcing unit **50** starts again its conveyance and is guided and output to the sheet bundle loading section **41** by a discharge roller pair **39**. The saddle-stitched sheet bundle (booklet) is loaded on the sheet bundle loading section **41**.

(2) Lateral Alignment Unit

FIG. **5**A is a front view illustrating a configuration of the lateral alignment unit **40** and FIG. **5**B is a plan view as cut plane X-X' is viewed from the upside.

The lateral alignment unit **40** includes a lateral alignment motor **401** which is a stepping motor, a gear **402**, movable frames **404***a* and **404***b* to which racks **403***a* and **403***b* are fixed, respectively, lateral alignment plates **405***a* and **405***b* disposed at both ends of the movable frames, and a support frame **406** supporting these.

The lateral alignment motor **401** allows the gear **402** to rotate in clockwise and counterclockwise directions. The gear **402** engages with the racks **403***a* and **403***b* and thus the racks **403***a* and **403***b* move in the directions of arrow E and arrow F shown in FIG. **5**A with the rotation of the gear **301**. The lateral alignment plates **405***a* and **405***b* move in a direction perpendicular to the sheet conveying direction with the movement of the racks **403***a* and **403***b*. When the gear **402** rotates in the clockwise direction in FIG. **5**A, the lateral alignment plates **405***a* and **405***b* move in the direction of arrow F (opening direction). When the gear **402** rotates in the counterclockwise direction in FIG. **5**A, the lateral alignment plates **405***a* and **405***b* move in the direction of arrow E (closing direction).

The support frame **406** is provided with a lateral alignment motor HP (Home Position) sensor **407**. The position of the lateral alignment plates **405***a* and **405***b* is controlled on the basis of the detection timing of the lateral alignment motor HP sensor **407** and the number of pulses of the lateral alignment motor **401**.

FIGS. **6**A and **6**B are diagrams illustrating the controlled positions of the lateral alignment plates **405***a* and **405***b*. The home position shown in FIG. **6**A is a position detected by the lateral alignment motor HP sensor **407** and the detected position serves as a base of various positions. The standby position is a position which is apart by about 15 mm from both lateral edges of the sheets, though it depends on the size of the sheets. An A4 size is assumed in FIGS. **6**A and **6**B. When the sheet bundle is actually subjected to the lateral alignment, the lateral alignment plates **405***a* and **405***b* move from the standby position to a position where they come contact with both edges of the sheets.

When the saddle-stitching is performed by the stapler **36** or the folding is performed by pushing the folding blade **37** after the lateral alignment is performed, both edges of the sheet bundle are slightly misaligned. When the saddle-stitching or the folding is performed, the lateral alignment plates **405***a* and **405***b* are made to move to a position (a stapling guide position and a folding guide position) which has a margin by about 1 mm from both edges of the sheet bundle, as shown in FIG. **6**B, to absorb the misalignment.

(3) Stacker

FIGS. **7** and **8** are diagrams illustrating a configuration of the stacker **35**. As shown in FIG. **7**, two stack pawls **211** (**211***a* and **211***b*) are exposed from the lower side of the stack tray **34**. The lower end of the sheet moving down along the stack tray **34** is received by the stack pawls **211** and the sheet bundle including a predetermined number of sheets is supported by the stack pawls **211**.

When the saddle-stitching or the folding is performed, the stack pawls **211** are controlled to move along the inclination of the stack tray **34** to a predetermined position.

As shown in FIG. **8**, the stacker **35** includes a stacker motor **200** which is a stepping motor, a gear **201**, a gear and pulley **202**, a driving mechanism including a timing belt **203**, stack pawls **211***a* and **211***b*, and a supporting portion **204** supporting these.

The stacker motor **200** allows the gear **201** and the gear and pulley **202** to rotate. The timing belt **203** is suspended on the gear and pulley **202** and the support section **204** fixed to the timing belt **203** is made to move in the arrow direction shown in FIG. **8**.

A coil spring **206** serving to prevent the backlash is also suspended on the gear and pulley **202**.

The support section **204** includes the stack pawls **211***a* and **211***b*, which move in the arrow direction shown in FIG. **7** with the movement of the support section **204**. The stack pawls **211***a* and **211***b* include flexible members **210***a* and **210***b* such as Mylar, respectively, which press and hold the sheet bundle aligned in the stack pawls **211***a* and **211***b* against a reference plane of the stack tray **34**.

A stacker motor HP sensor **205** is disposed to control the moving positions of the stack pawls **211***a* and **211***b*. The positions of the stack pawls **211***a* and **211***b* are controlled on the basis of the detection timing of the stacker motor HP sensor **205** and the number of pulses of the stacker motor **200**.

(4) Folding Unit

FIG. **9** is a diagram illustrating a configuration of a folding unit **300**.

The folding unit **300** includes the folding roller pair **38** folding a sheet bundle, the folding blade **37** which is a pressing member pushing the sheet bundle into the nip of the folding roller pair **38**, and the guide member **302** holding the folding blade **37** so as to be movable toward the folding roller pair **38** and regulating the fluctuation of the folding blade **37** in the direction perpendicular to the moving direction of the folding blade **37** before pushing the sheet bundle into the nip.

The folding roller pair **38** includes a fixed folding roller **38***a* and a movable folding roller **38***b*. The fixed folding roller **38***a* is rotatably supported by an apparatus frame.

The movable folding roller **38***b* is rotatably supported by one end **304***b* of an arm **304**, is movable in the direction perpendicular to the moving direction of the folding blade **37**, and can be contacted with and separated from the fixed folding roller **38***a*.

A spring **306** is mounted on other end **304***c* of the arm **304**. The movable folding roller **38***b* is urged by the spring **306** via the arm **304** rotating about a supporting point **304***a* and comes in pressing contact with the fixed folding roller **38***a* to form the nip. The one end **304***b* is provided with a first support hole **304***d* allowing the movable folding roller **38***b* to move straightly without drawing an arc when the arm **304** rotates.

The folding blade **37** includes the blade end portion **37***a* pushing a sheet bundle, first and second holding members **308** and **310** holding the blade end portion **37***a* interposed therebetween, and a side plate **312** attached to both ends of the second holding member **310**.

A stud **314** is disposed in the front side of the side plate **312**, that is, the side facing the folding roller pair **38**, and a shaft **316** is disposed in the rear side thereof. The folding blade **37** is slidably held by the guide member **302** via the stud **314** and the shaft **316**.

The gap between the stud **314** and the shaft **316** is more stable as it is longer. Accordingly, in this embodiment, the position of the stud **314** is closer to the folding roller pair **38** than to the end of the blade end portion **37***a*. The stud **314** and the shaft **316** as the sliding member are not limited to the above-mentioned configuration, but both may be a stud or a shaft. Alternatively, they may be rotatable rollers. The fixing position of the stud **314** to the side plate **312** is not limited to the above-mentioned configuration.

Both ends of the shaft **316** are provided with a driving mechanism **318** allowing the folding blade **37** to slide. The driving mechanism **318** includes a cam shaft **320**, a groove cam **322** having a groove **322***a* and rotating about the cam shaft **320**, and a driven member **324**. A roller **326** such as a roller follower as a contactor is rotatably guided in the groove **322***a* of the groove cam **322** and the roller **326** is attached to the driven member **324**. One end of the driven member **324** is provided with a driven member rotation shaft **328** and the driven member rotation shaft **328** is attached to the apparatus frame. The groove cam **322** is made to rotate by a driving motor connected to one end of the cam shaft **320**. When the roller **326** is guided along the groove **322***a* with the rotation of the groove cam **322**, the driven member **324** repeats the reciprocation like a pendulum about the driven member rotation shaft **328** due to the eccentricity of the groove **322***a*.

A driving mechanism of the folding roller pair **38** and the folding blade **37** will be described now.

FIG. **10** is a diagram illustrating a configuration of the driving mechanism of the folding roller pair **38** and the folding blade **37**. The driving mechanism includes a folding motor **800** which is a DC motor (see FIG. **11**), a timing belt **801**, a one-way clutch **802**, gears **803***a*, **803***b*, **803***c*, **803***d*, **803***e*, **803***f*, **803***g*, **901***a*, and **901***b*, and an electromagnetic clutch **900**.

The folding motor **800** allows the gear **803***a* to rotate via the timing belt **801** and thus allows the electromagnetic clutch **900** and the gear **803***b* to rotate. The gear **803***b* is provided with the one-way clutch **802** (see FIG. **11**). The one-way clutch **802** allows the fixed folding roller **38***a* to rotate in a path passing through the gears **803***b*, **803***c*, **803***d*, and **803***e* when the folding motor **800** is made to rotate forwardly. On the other hand, the one-way clutch allows the fixed folding roller **38***a* to rotate in another path, that is, a path passing through the gears **803***b*, **803***f*, **803***g*, **803***d*, and **803***e* when the folding motor **800** is made to rotate backwardly. This configuration is the driving mechanism of the folding roller pair **38**.

The folding blade **37** also employs the folding motor **800** as a driving source. When the electromagnetic clutch **900** is turned on, the rotation of the folding motor **800** is transmitted to the gears **901***a* and **901***b*. The rotation of the gear **901***b* is transmitted to the driving mechanism **318** shown in FIG. **9** and thus the folding blade **37** is made to slide forward and backward about the nip of the folding roller pair **38** with the rotation of the driving mechanism **318**.

The folding motor **800** is provided with an encoder actuator **810** and a folding motor encoder sensor **811**, which are connected to the folding motor **800**. The number of rotations of the folding roller pair **38** and the moving position of the folding blade **37** are controlled on the basis of an encoder pulse output from the folding motor encoder sensor **811**.

FIGS. **12** and **13** are diagrams illustrating a change of a rotation transmitting path due to the switching of the one-way clutch **802**.

When the folding motor **800** is made to rotate in the direction of arrow E in FIG. **12**, the gear **803***b* is made to rotate in the direction of arrow H via the timing belt **801**, the gear **803***a*, and the electromagnetic clutch **900**. When the gear **803***b* rotates in the direction of arrow H, the one-way clutch **802** transmits the rotation to the gear **803***c* and the fixed folding roller **38***a* is thus made to rotate in the direction of arrow J via the gears **803***d* and **803***e*. The gear train employing the gear **803***c* by allowing the folding motor **800** to rotate in the direction of arrow E is configured to increase its reduction ratio. As a result, the folding roller pair **38** rotates at a low speed and with high torque.

On the other hand, as shown in FIG. **13**, when the folding motor **800** is made to rotate in the direction of arrow F (the direction opposite to the direction of arrow E in FIG. **12**) in FIG. **13**, the gear **803***b* is made to rotate in the direction of arrow I via the timing belt **801**, the gear **803***a*, and the electromagnetic clutch **900**. When the gear **803***b* rotates in the direction of arrow I, the one-way clutch **802** transmits the rotation to the gear **803***f* instead of the gear **803***c* and the fixed folding roller **38***a* is thus made to rotate in the direction of arrow J via the gears **803***g*, **803***d*, and **803***e*.

The gear train employing the gears **803***f* and **803***g* by allowing the folding motor **800** to rotate in the direction of arrow F is configured to decrease its reduction ratio. As a result, the folding roller pair **38** rotates at a high speed.

Since the gear train including the gears **803***f* and **803***g* rotates in the direction of arrow J similarly to FIG. **12**, the conveyance direction of the sheet bundle in the folding roller pair **38** is not inverted.

With the above-mentioned mechanism, when the folding of the sheet bundle is performed, it is possible to drive the folding roller pair at a low speed and the high torque by allowing the folding motor **800** to rotate in the direction of arrow E, that is, a rotating direction in which the reduction ratio is high

On the other hand, after the folding of the sheet bundle is ended, it is possible to convey the sheet bundle to the fold reinforcing unit **50** at a high speed by temporarily stopping the rotation of the motor and then allowing the folding motor **800** to rotate in the direction of arrow F which is the opposite direction.

(5) Fold Reinforcing Unit

FIG. **14** is a perspective appearance view illustrating the entire structure of the fold reinforcing unit **50**. The fold reinforcing unit **50** includes a fold reinforcing roller unit **60** (hereinafter, simply referred to as a roller unit **60**), a support section **70**, and a driving section **80**.

The roller unit **60** includes the fold reinforcing roller pair **51**. The fold reinforcing roller pair **51** nips and presses the fold of the sheet bundle pushed out from the folding roller pair **38** positioned upstream and moves along the fold, thereby reinforcing the fold.

The support section **70** supports the roller unit **60** to be slidable in the fold direction and includes nipping members of the sheet bundle and structure members of the whole fold reinforcing unit **50**.

The driving section **80** includes a fold reinforcing motor **81**. The fold reinforcing motor **81** drives the roller unit **60** along the fold.

Among the roller unit **60**, the support section **70**, and the driving section **80**, first, a structure of the support section **70** will be described with reference to FIG. **14** and FIGS. **15**A and **15**B. FIGS. **15**A and **15**B are sectional views schematically illustrating the structure of the support section **70**. FIG. **15**A is a sectional view when the roller unit **60** is located at a home position (standby position: position of the left end in FIG. **14**) and FIG. **15**B is a sectional view when the roller unit **60** is moving (reinforcing the fold).

The support section **70** includes a frame **71**. The frame **71** includes a top plate **711**, right and left side plates **712***a* and **712***b*, a bottom plate **713**, a back plate **714**, a sheet bundle loading base (loading base) **715** (see FIGS. **15**A, **15**B, etc.) and the like.

The top plate **711** is provided with a support hole **711***a* extending in the longitudinal direction.

A support shaft **75** supporting the roller unit **60**, a conveyance guide **72** having an L-shaped section, a driving shaft **76** driving the conveyance guide **72** in the vertical direction (see FIGS. **15**A, **15**B, etc.) are disposed between both side plates **712***a* and **712***b*.

A band-like flexible member (second flexible member) **73** formed of a resin material such as film-like polyethylene terephthalate (PET) extends from a bottom plate (nipping plate) **72***a* of the conveyance guide **72**. A similar flexible member (first flexible member) **74** also extends from the sheet loading base **715**. An elastic member **72***b* to be described later is bonded to the surface, facing the sheet bundle loading base **715**, of the bottom plate (nipping plate) **72***a* of the conveyance guide **72**.

As shown in FIGS. **15**A and **15**B, a fold **100***a* of a sheet bundle **100** is nipped between the flexible members **73** and **74** and is pressed by the fold reinforcing roller pair **51** (the upper roller **51***a* and the lower roller **51***b*) with the flexible members **73** and **74** interposed therebetween, thereby reinforcing the fold. The flexible members **73** and **74** prevent the occurrence of flaws or wrinkles in the sheet bundle **100**.

The leading edges of the flexible members **73** and **74** are provided with notches **73***a* and **74***b*. The notches **73***a* and **74***b* are formed at positions corresponding to positions of the staples of the fold to prevent the flexible members **73** and **74** from being damaged by the staples.

As described later, a through hole **61** allowing the support shaft **75** to pass therethrough is disposed in a lower portion of the roller unit **60**. A support roller **62** for posture holding is disposed in an upper portion of the roller unit **60** and the support roller **62** moves along the support hole **711***a* formed in the top plate **711**.

The position (except the position change in the moving direction) of the roller unit **60** and the attitude of three-axis are regulated by the support shaft **75** and the through hole **61**, together with the support hole **711***a* and the support roller **62**, and are kept unchanged while the roller unit **60** is moving.

The structure of the roller unit **60** will be described now. FIG. **16** is a perspective appearance view illustrating a structure of the roller unit **60** and is a view as viewed from the sending source (opposite to FIG. **14**) of the sheet bundle.

The roller unit **60** is a unit having the fold reinforcing roller pair **51** built therein and includes a unit support section **63** which is positioned in a lower portion thereof and is provided with a through hole **61** and a roller frame **67** which is fixed to an upper portion of the unit support section **63**.

In the roller frame **67**, an upper frame **67***a* having a hollow part and a lower frame **67***b* having a hollow part are fixed and coupled to each other by a frame plate **67***c*.

Besides, the roller unit **60** includes an upper link member (second link member) **65** and a lower link member (first link member) **66**, both of which are spring-coupled to each other by a spring **68**. One end of the spring **68** is locked to a hook hole **65***b* of the upper link member **65** and the other end of the spring **68** is locked to a notch **66***b* of the lower link member **66**. FIG. **16** shows the spring **68** in a free state in which the other end of the spring **68** is unlocked from the notch **66***b*. In the state where the other end of the spring **68** is actually locked to the notch **66***b*, the pulling force of the spring **68** is applied between the upper link member **65** and the lower link member **66**.

The lower roller **51***b* as one of the fold reinforcing roller pair **51** is contained in the hollow portion of the lower frame **67***b*. The lower roller **51***b* is supported to be rotatable about a lower roller shaft (not shown) fixed to the lower frame **67***b*.

The lower link member **66** is rotatably coupled to the side surface of the lower frame **67***b* via a lower link shaft **66***a* (see FIG. **14**) fixed to the lower frame **67***b*.

The upper roller **51***a* as one of the fold reinforcing roller pair **51** is contained in the hollow portion of the upper frame **67***a*. The upper roller **51***a* is supported to be rotatable about an upper roller shaft (not shown) fixed to the upper link member **65** (not to the upper frame **67***a*).

The rotation shaft (lower roller shaft) of the lower roller **51***b* is fixed to the lower frame **67***b* (that is, fixed to the roller frame **67**). Even if the roller unit **60** moves, the position of the lower roller **51***b* does not change in the vertical direction. The position of the upper end of the lower roller **51***b* is adjusted to become the same position as the flexible member **74**. When the roller unit **60** moves, the lower roller **51***b* rotates while contacting with the lower surface of the flexible member **74**.

On the other hand, the upper roller shaft of the roller **51***a* is fixed to the upper link member **65**. When the roller unit **60** goes away from the home position and starts its movement, the upper link member **65** is pulled by the spring **68** and starts rotating downward about an upper link shaft **65***a*. By this rotation, the upper roller **51***a* rotatably attached to the upper link member **65** starts moving down and moves to a position where it comes in contact with the lower roller **51***b*. The pressing force caused by the pulling force of the spring **68** is mutually applied between the upper roller **51***a* and the lower roller **51***b*. Actually, since the sheet bundle is nipped between the upper roller **51***a* and the lower roller **51***b* with the flexible members **73** and **74** interposed therebetween, the fold of the sheet bundle is reinforced by the pressing force between the upper roller **51***a* and the lower roller **51***b*.

The structure of the driving section **80** will be described now. FIG. **17** is a view showing a configuration and a structure of the driving section **80**. FIG. **17** is a view as the conveyance source is viewed from the conveyance destination of the sheet bundle and also shows the roller unit **60** at the home position, the folding roller pair **38**, and the driving mechanism of the folding roller pair **38**. The illustration of structural members of the support section **70** is partially omitted for convenience of explanation.

The driving section **80** includes the fold reinforcing motor **81** as a unique driving source of the fold reinforcing unit **50**. The fold reinforcing motor **81** is a DC motor and the rotation direction and the rotation speed thereof can be controlled from the outside.

The driving force of the fold reinforcing motor **81** is transmitted to a pulley **83** via a motor belt **82** and is further transmitted from a gear **83***a* of the pulley **83** to a driving-side pulley **86***a* via a gear **84** and a gear **85**. A unit driving belt **87** is stretched between the driving-side pulley **86***a* and a driven-side pulley **86***b*. The unit driving belt **87** is made to move between the driving-side pulley **86***a* and the driven-side pulley **86***b* by the driving force of the fold reinforcing motor **81**.

A rack is formed on the surface of the unit driving belt **87**. The rack and the teeth of a fitting section **63***a* (see FIG. **16**) provided at a lower part of the roller unit **60** are fitted to each other, whereby the roller unit **60** can be made to certainly move in the folding direction without sliding. The moving direction of the unit driving belt **87** can be changed by reversing the rotation direction of the fold reinforcing motor **81**, thereby allowing the roller unit **60** to reciprocate.

The moving distance and the moving speed of the unit driving belt **87**, that is, the moving distance and the moving speed of the roller unit **60**, can be controlled by controlling the rotation of the fold reinforcing motor **81**. The rotation distance and the rotation speed of the fold reinforcing motor **81** are detected by a sequence of pulse signals outputted from an encoder sensor **88** to control the rotation of the fold reinforcing motor **81** on the basis of the detected rotation distance and rotation speed.

The fold reinforcing motor **81** may be constructed of a pulse motor. In this case, the rotation speed can be detected by counting the pulses directly outputted from the fold reinforcing motor **81**.

FIG. **18** is a diagram illustrating a relation between an effective driving range of the roller unit **60** and a width of a processable maximum sheet size (for example, A3 size). As shown in FIG. **18**, the home position of the roller unit **60** is set at a position where even the sheet bundle of the processable maximum size does not interfere. A position of the roller unit **60** farthest from the home position is set to the farthest position within the range where the nip of the fold reinforcing roller pair **51** does not exceed the edge of the sheet bundle of the processable maximum size.

The roller unit **60** goes away from the home position and starts moving, moves along the fold while reinforcing the fold, and once stops at the edge of the sheet bundle opposite to the home position. Thereafter, the roller unit moves along a return path while continuously reinforcing the fold and returns to the home position.

The position where the roller unit once stops at the edge of the sheet bundle opposite to the home position varies according to the sheet size and the once stop position is determined on the basis of information on the sheet size.

The vertical driving of the upper roller **51***a* inside the roller unit **60** and the vertical driving of the conveyance guide **72** are also performed in addition to the movement of the roller unit **60** along the fold by the fold reinforcing unit **50**. Both driving sources of these vertical drivings are the fold reinforcing motor **81**. That is, all the driving operations of the fold reinforcing unit **50** are performed by the single fold reinforcing motor **81**. Hereinafter, the mechanism of the vertical driving of the upper roller **51***a* and the mechanism of the vertical driving of the conveyance guide **72** will be described now.

FIG. **19** and FIG. **20** are diagrams illustrating the mechanism of the vertical driving of the upper roller **51***a*. As described above, the upper link member **65** and the lower link member **66** of the roller unit **60** are spring-coupled to each other by the spring **68** at the position farthest from the respective rotation shafts (**65***a* and **66***a*). The lower link member **66** is provided with a freely rotating guide roller **66***c* (see FIG. **14**, etc.).

As shown in FIG. **19**, the support section **70** includes a guide rail **77** having an L-shaped section. The guide rail **77** includes an inclined section **77***a* and is parallel to the fold of the sheet bundle except for the inclined section **77***a*.

When the roller unit **60** is driven by the driving belt **87** and goes away from the home position, as shown in FIG. **20**, the guide roller **66***c* comes in contact with the bottom surface of the inclined section **77***a* of the guide rail **77**. Thereafter, the guide roller **66***c* moves down along the bottom surface of the inclined section **77***a*. As the guide roller **66***c* moves down, the lower link member **66** rotates about the lower link shaft **66***a* in the counterclockwise direction in FIG. **20**. Besides, the upper link member **65** is also pulled by the spring **68** and rotates in the counterclockwise direction about the upper link shaft **65***a*. As a result, while the roller unit **60** is moving along the inclined section **77***a*, the upper roller **51***a* positioned between the upper link shaft **65***a* and the hook hole **65***b* of the spring **68** gradually moves down and the gap between the upper roller **51***a* and the lower roller **51***b* becomes gradually short. When the inclined section **77***a* terminates, the upper roller **51***a* and the lower roller **51***b* come in contact with each other. The upper roller **51***a* and the lower roller **51***b* may come in contact with each other before the inclined section **77***a* terminates. At this time, the pressure (pressing force) for pressing each other acts between the upper roller **51***a* and the lower roller **51***b*. The pressing is based on the pulling force of the spring **68**.

In the horizontal region of the guide rail **77** (that is, the effective driving region), the upper roller **51***a* and the lower roller **51***b* apply the pressure to the fold of the sheet bundle while keeping the pressing force, thereby reinforcing the fold.

The mechanism of the vertical driving of the conveyance guide **72** will be described now. As shown in FIG. **15**A, when the roller unit **60** is located at the home position, the conveyance guide **72** is lifted up and the sheet bundle **100** is conveyed through an opening between the bottom plate **72***a* of the conveyance guide **72** and the sheet bundle loading base **715**. On the other hand, as shown in FIG. **15**B, when the roller unit **60** moves into the effective movement range and performs the fold reinforcing operation, the conveyance guide **72** moves down and nips the sheet bundle.

FIGS. **21** and **22** are diagrams illustrating a driving structure used for the vertical driving of the conveyance guide **72**.

As shown in FIGS. **21** and **22**, the driving shaft **76** used for the vertical driving of the conveyance guide **72** is disposed between the conveyance guide **72** and the folding roller pair **38**. A cam member **761** is fixed to one end of the driving shaft **76** close to the home position.

As shown in FIG. **22**, the cam member **761** includes a twisted section **761***a* having a twisted shape of a plate member, a horizontal section **761***c* extending from the twisted section **761***a*, and a leading section **761***b* on the opposite side of the horizontal section **761***c*.

A lever member **762** is fixed to the driving shaft **76** at the leading end of the cam member **761** close to the home position. The leading section of the lever member **762** is provided with a long hole **762***b* and a lever roller **762***a* fixed to the end of the conveyance guide **72** is slidably inserted in the long hole **762***b*.

A bearing member **722** is fixed to the end of the conveyance guide **72**. The bearing member **722** is inserted into a long hole **722***a* formed in the roller frame **67** of the roller unit **60** and can slide in the vertical direction.

The end of the bottom plate **72***a* of the conveyance guide **72** close to the home position and the bottom plate **713** of the frame **71** are spring-coupled to each other by a conveyance guide spring **721**. The conveyance guide **72** is pulled down (toward the bottom plate **713**) by the pulling force of the conveyance guide spring **721**.

The movement of this driving structure will be described with reference to FIGS. **23**A to **23**D.

FIGS. **23**A and **23**B are diagrams illustrating a state where the roller unit **60** moves apart from the home position, that is, a state where it reinforcing the fold.

FIG. **23**A is a diagram illustrating a positional relation between the cam member **761** fixed to the driving shaft **76** and a conveyance guide supporting base **67***d*. The roller unit **60** includes the conveyance guide supporting base **67***d* horizontally extending from the roller frame **67** (see FIGS. **21** and **16**). When the roller unit **60** goes away from the home position, the cam member **761** is located at a position separated from the conveyance guide supporting base **67***d* and they do not interfere with each other.

On the other hand, when reinforcing the fold, as shown in FIG. **23**B, the conveyance guide **72** is pulled down by the pulling force of the conveyance guide spring **721** and thus the bottom plate **72***a* (and the flexible member **73**) of the conveyance guide **72** is strongly pressed against the sheet bundle loading base **715** (and the flexible member **74**) with the sheet bundle (not shown) interposed therebetween.

At this time, the bearing member **722** fixed to the conveyance guide **72** and the lever roller **762***a* are also pulled down and thus the leading end of the lever member **762** is directed slightly downward and is stopped in this state. As shown in FIG. **23**A, the leading section **761***b* of the cam member **761** is stopped at the position where it is parallel to the conveyance guide supporting base **67***d* of the roller unit **60**.

When the roller unit **60** reaches the opposite side of the home position and again returns to the vicinity of the home position, the conveyance guide supporting base **67***d* of the roller unit **60** first come in contact with the lower surface of the leading section **761***b* of the cam member **761**.

Thereafter, when the roller unit **60** further moves to the home position, the conveyance guide supporting base **67***d* moves while sliding on the lower surface of the twisted section **761***a* of the cam member **761**. At this time, an upward force acting on the cam member **761** is generated by the curve of the twisted section **761***a* to allow the driving shaft **76** fixed to the cam member **761** to rotate (rotate in the counterclockwise direction in FIG. **23**C).

As the driving shaft **76** rotates, the lever member **762** also rotates in the same direction and the leading end of the lever member **762** moves up. As a result, the lever roller **762***a* inserted into the long hole **762***b* of the lever member **762** is pulled up and the conveyance guide **72** fixed to the lever roller **762***a* is also made to move up against the pulling force of the conveyance guide spring **721**.

When the roller unit **60** completely returns to the home position, the conveyance guide supporting base **67***d* of the roller unit **60** passes through the twisted section **761***a* of the cam member **761**, reaches the horizontal section **761***c*, and stops here.

A force for causing a downward movement is applied to the conveyance guide **72** by the pulling force of the conveyance guide spring **721**. However, at the home position, since the horizontal section **761***c* of the cam member **761** is placed on the upper surface of the conveyance guide supporting base **67***d*, it cannot move down. Thus, the driving shaft **76** and the lever member **762** are in the state where the rotation in the clockwise direction is inhibited and the lever roller **762***a* and the conveyance guide **72** fixed thereto cannot thus move down.

As described above, when the roller unit **60** is located at the home position, the conveyance guide **72** and the flexible member **73** are held in the state where they are lifted up.

In this state, the sheet bundle of which the fold is already reinforced is pushed out with the rotation of the folding roller pair **38** and is conveyed to the sheet bundle loading section **41**. The sheet bundle of which the fold is to be reinforced from now is conveyed in this state so that the fold is positioned between the flexible members **73** and **74**.

When the roller unit **60** goes away from the home position in order to reinforce the fold, the movement thereof is opposite to the above-mentioned movement. When the roller unit **60** starts going away from the home position, the conveyance guide supporting base **67***d* of the roller unit **60** moves from the horizontal section **761***c* of the cam member **761** to the position of the twisted section **761***a*. The driving shaft **76** receives a clockwise force resulting from the pulling force of the conveyance guide spring **721** and gradually rotates in the clockwise direction while the conveyance guide supporting base **67***d* moves along the curved portion of the twisted section **761***a*. The lever member **762** also rotates in the clockwise direction with this movement and the lever roller **762***a*, the bearing member **722**, and the conveyance guide **72** fixed to these move down. Finally, the bottom plate **72***a* of the conveyance guide **72** and the flexible member **73** reach the sheet bundle and the downward movement stops at the stage where the sheet bundle is pressed with the pulling force of the conveyance guide spring **721**.

Although the description is hitherto given to the lateral movement of the roller unit **60** along the fold of the sheet bundle, the vertical movement of the upper roller **51***a* in the roller unit **60**, and the vertical movement of the conveyance guide **72**, these movements can be roughly summarized as follows.

(a) When the roller unit **60** is located at the home position, the conveyance guide **72** and the upper flexible member **73** are lifted up. Besides, the upper roller **51***a* in the roller unit **60** is also lifted up.

Incidentally, the positions of the sheet bundle loading base **715** and the lower flexible member **74** in the vertical direction are almost the same as the nip of the folding roller pair **38** and are always constant regardless of the movement of the roller unit **60**. Similarly, the vertical position of the lower roller **51***b* in the roller unit **60** is always constant regardless of the movement of the roller unit **60** and the position of the upper end of the lower roller **51***b* is set to almost the same position as the lower flexible member **74**.

(b) When the roller unit **60** is located at the home position, the sheet bundle is conveyed through the nip of the folding roller pair **38** and the conveyance of the sheet bundle is once stopped when the fold reaches between the flexible members **73** and **74**.

(c) Here, the fold reinforcing motor **81** is driven and the roller unit **60** starts the lateral movement by the unit driving belt **87** and starts going away from the home position.

(d) When the roller unit **60** goes away from the home position, the conveyance guide **72** and the upper flexible member **73** move down and press the sheet bundle from above in cooperation with the bottom plate **72***a* of the conveyance guide **72** (operation shown in FIGS. **23**A to **23**D). The pressing force results from the pulling force of the conveyance guide spring **721**. The downward movement of the conveyance guide **72** is completed before the roller unit **60** reaches the effective driving range, where the fold of the sheet bundle is nipped by the upper and lower flexible members **73** and **74**.

(e) When the roller unit **60** goes away from the home position, the upper roller **51***a* in the roller unit **60** also starts moving down. The upper roller presses (operation of FIG. **20**) the upper surface of the upper flexible member **73** of which the downward operation is ended. At this time, the lower roller **51***b* is positioned at the lower surface of the lower flexible member **74** and the upper and lower flexible members **73** and **74** are pressed by the upper roller **51***a* and the lower roller **51***b*. The pressing force results from the pulling force of the spring **68** in the roller unit **60**.

(f) Thereafter, the roller unit **60** is made to move with the movement of the unit driving belt **87**. When the roller unit **60** reaches the position of the sheet bundle, the upper roller **51***a* runs onto the sheet bundle with the upper flexible member **73** interposed therebetween and moves along the fold while pressing the fold of the sheet bundle. When the roller unit **60** reaches the opposite end of the home position, the movement of the unit driving belt **87** is reversed and the roller unit moves in the return path along the fold while pressing the fold of the sheet bundle. Finally, the roller unit returns to the home position.

As described above, in the fold reinforcing unit **50** according to this embodiment, since the sheet bundle is nipped by the fold reinforcing roller pair **51** with the upper and lower flexible members **73** and **74** interposed therebetween, the sheet is not turned up (curled up) at the edge of the sheet bundle. Besides, since the fold reinforcing roller pair **51** does not come in direct contact with the fold, a wrinkle or a flaw is not generated on the fold.

Besides, the conveyance guide **72** being driven in the vertical direction is provided and the conveyance guide **72** applies the pressure to the sheet bundle to press it. Accordingly, even if the fold reinforcing roller pair **51** moves along the fold, the sheet bundle is not misaligned in the lateral direction.

In the past, in order to prevent the sheet bundle from being misaligned in the lateral direction, a structure was proposed in which a stop member is disposed at the edge of the sheet bundle. However, the position of the stop member must be changed depending on the size of the sheet, thereby causing inconvenience.

On the contrary, in this embodiment, since the sheet bundle is pressed by the conveyance guide **72** having a sufficient width to cover the width of the maximum sheet size (for example, A3 size), the lateral misalignment of the sheet bundle can be prevented regardless of the sheet size.

Besides, the fold reinforcing unit **50** according to this embodiment includes a conveyance guide roller **64** further pressing the conveyance guide **72**. As shown in FIG. **6**, the conveyance guide roller **64** is attached to the upper link member **65** of the roller unit **60**. When the roller unit **60** goes away from the home position, the conveyance guide roller **64** moves down and presses the bottom plate **72***a* of the conveyance guide **72** from above, similarly to the upper roller **51***a*, (see FIGS. **15**A and **15**B). The downward movement of the conveyance guide roller **64** is embodied by the same mechanism as the downward movement of the upper roller **51***a*. The conveyance guide **72** is pressed by the conveyance guide roller **64** in addition to the pulling force of the conveyance guide spring **721**, thereby reinforcing the prevention of the lateral misalignment of the sheet bundle.

Here, a point to be noted is that in this embodiment, three independent movements, that is, the lateral movement of the roller unit **60**, the vertical movement of the upper roller **51***a* (and the conveyance guide roller **64**) in the roller unit **60**, and the vertical movement of the conveyance guide **72**, are embodied by the single driving source, that is, by only the fold reinforcing motor **81**, not by plural independent driving sources. As a result, the number of driving motors can be reduced, which contributes to the reduction in cost and the reduction in electric power. When it is intended to embody the respective independent movements by the use of plural driving motors, the synchronization of the mutual movements must be taken and a control circuit for the synchronization becomes complicated. On the contrary, in this embodiment, since the respective movements are embodied by the single fold reinforcing motor **81**, a synchronization control circuit of the driving motors is not necessary.

FIG. **24** is a diagram illustrating a positional relation around the fold reinforcing unit **50**. A fold reinforcing position sensor **720** is disposed between the folding roller pair **38** (**38***a* and **38***b*) and the fold reinforcing unit **50**. The fold reinforcing position sensor **720** includes a sensor lever **720***a* and detects the passing timing of the leading edge of the sheet bundle by allowing the folded portion of the sheet bundle (the leading edge of the sheet bundle) passing through the folding roller pair **38** to push down the sensor lever **720***a*. After the passing timing is detected, the sheet bundle is conveyed by a predetermined distance and then the sheet bundle is stopped. Thereafter, the fold reinforcing roller pair **51***a* and **51***b* is made to move to the fold, thereby reinforcing the fold.

A conveyance reference plane A is disposed at a position equal to or slightly lower than the outer circumferential surface of the fixed folding roller **38***a*. The outer circumferential surface of the fold reinforcing roller **51***b* of which the position is fixed is disposed at a position equal to or slightly lower than the conveyance reference plane A. Thanks to these positional relations, the folded portion of the sheet bundle can be accurately guided to the fold reinforcing position.

As described above, when the roller unit **60** goes away from the home position, the conveyance guide **72** and the upper flexible member **73** move down and the bottom plate (nipping plate) **72***a* of the conveyance guide **72** presses the sheet bundle from above (operations shown in FIGS. **23**A to **23**D). The pressing force is the pulling force of the conveyance guide spring **721** and the conveyance guide spring **721** is made to have a strong elastic force so as to prevent the lateral misalignment of the sheet bundle during the fold reinforcing operation. Accordingly, when the roller unit **60** goes away from the home position, the bottom plate **72***a* of the conveyance guide **72** moves down to the sheet loading base **715** at a high speed.

When a normal fold reinforcing operation is performed, the impact accompanied with the downward movement of the bottom plate is absorbed due to the sheet bundle interposed between the bottom plate **72***a* and the sheet loading base **715**.

However, no sheet bundle exists in an initial operation. Accordingly, when the roller unit **60** goes away from the home position, the bottom plate **72***a* directly collides with the sheet loading base **715** at a high speed, thereby generating an impact sound not negligible.

Here, the initial operation means an operation of checking abnormality by allowing the roller unit **60** to once move to the home position and then allowing the roller unit **60** to reciprocate at least once in the state where no sheet bundle exists before starting performing a printing on a sheet after the apparatus is powered, etc. The initial operation is performed on the lateral alignment unit **40** or the stacker **35** as well as the roller unit **60** and permits the high-accuracy position control using the detection timing of the home position sensors acquired from the initial operation, in addition to the check of abnormality. Even when the apparatus is stopped due to a jam of a sheet, etc., the initial operation is performed as a restoring operation after removing the jammed sheet.

The initial operation is performed for the above-mentioned purposes. However, in order to reduce the impact sound generated due to the collision of the bottom plate **72***a* and the sheet loading base **715**, in the sheet folding apparatus **30** according to this embodiment, the elastic member **72***b* is disposed on the surface, facing the sheet loading base **715**, of the bottom plate (nipping plate) **72***a* as shown in FIGS. **25** and **26**.

The elastic member **72***b* is a plate-like elastomer such as a cushion member or a rubber member. By bonding the elastic member **72***b* to the surface, facing the sheet loading base **715**, of the bottom plate (nipping plate) **72***a*, for example, by the use of a double-sided tape, it is possible to prevent the generation of the impact sound.

Even in the normal operation of reinforcing the folding of a sheet bundle, it is possible to further prevent the lateral misalignment of the sheet bundle by the use of the elastic member **72***b*.

Since the elastic member **72***b* is bonded to the almost entire surface of the bottom plate **72***a* of the conveyance guide **72** but notches **72***c* are formed at the center of the bottom plate **72***a*, the elastic member is divided into two parts about the notches **72***c*.

As shown in FIGS. **27**A, **27**B, and **27**C, the notches **72***c* is disposed so that the sensor lever **720***a* of the fold reinforcing position sensor **720** does not interfere with the conveyance guide **72** even in the state where the conveyance guide **72** moves down. Even when the conveyance guide **72** moves down but no sheet bundle is conveyed, the sensor lever **720***a* can return to its upright posture by the notches **72***c*, thereby satisfactorily detecting the presence or absence of the sheet bundle.

Another elastic member **72***d* may be disposed in the sheet loading base **715** in addition to the bottom plate **72***a* of the conveyance guide **72**. In this case, it is preferable that the elastic member **72***d* is buried in the sheet loading base **715** so as not to hinder the conveyance of the sheet bundle. That is, it is preferable that a second elastic member **72***d* of the sheet loading base **715** (in the lower side) is directed to the elastic member **72***b* of the bottom plate **72***a* (in the upper side) and does not protrude from the surface of the sheet loading base **715**.

Further in this case, the frictional coefficient of the second elastic member disposed in the sheet loading base **715** (in the lower side) is preferably lower than the frictional coefficient of the elastic member **72***b* disposed in the bottom plate **72***a* of the conveyance guide **72** (in the upper side). As a result, it is possible to prevent the lateral misalignment of the sheet bundle due to the elastic member **72***b* having the high frictional coefficient of the bottom plate **72***a* (in the upper side), while it is also possible to smoothly convey the sheet bundle due to the second elastic member having the low frictional coefficient of the sheet loading base **715**.

(6) Operation Sequence

FIG. **28** is a flowchart illustrating an example of an operation sequence of piling and receiving sheets in the stack tray **34**. FIG. **29** is a timing diagram illustrating ON and OFF states of the units associated with the operation sequence.

When a discharge signal of a first sheet is output from the image forming apparatus **10**, the driving of the conveying motor **301** is started (ACT**1**) and the stacker **35** and the lateral alignment plates **405***a* and **405***b* are made to move to the standby position (ACT**2** and ACT**3**).

Thereafter, a sheet is sensed by the discharge sensor **333** and when predetermined pulses for allowing the sheet to reach the stack tray **34** pass after the off of the sensor is detected (ACT**4**), the solenoid **334** is turned on (ACT**5**).

By turning on the solenoid **334**, the assist roller **332** conveys the sheet conveyed from the stack tray **34** to the stacker **35**. When the conveying motor **301** is driven again by predetermined pulses after the solenoid **334** is turned on (ACT**6**), the lateral alignment motor **401** starts its driving and performs an operation of laterally aligning the sheets (ACT**7**).

When the conveying motor **301** is driven again by the predetermined pulses after starting the driving of the lateral alignment motor **401**, the solenoid **334** is turned off (ACT**8**). Thereafter, when the lateral alignment operation is ended, the lateral alignment motor **401** is made to rotate in the opening direction which is the opposite direction into the standby position (ACT**9**). These processes are repeated until a designated number of sheets are stacked in the stacker **35** (ACT**10**).

After the trailing edge of the sheet is sensed by the discharge sensor **333** in ACT**4**, when the sheet in process is the first sheet, the conveyance speed is reduced. This is because the friction is small due to no sheet on the stack tray **34** in case of the first sheet and the sheet is flied too high when the sheet is discharged from the discharge roller **33** as the final roller in the conveyance path onto the stack tray **34**. In case of the second and subsequent sheets, a sheet is remains on the stack tray **34**. Accordingly, it is not necessary to reduce the speed due to the friction existing between the sheets.

The period of time when the assist roller **332** is turned on from ACT**5** to ACT**8** varies depending on the sheet size designated from the image forming apparatus **10**. This is because the sheet receiving position in the stacker **35** varies depending on the sheet size.

The predetermined pulses in ACT**6** vary depending on the first sheet or the second and subsequent sheets. This is because in the lateral alignment (operation) using the lateral alignment plates **405***a* and **405***b*, it is necessary to bring the assist roller **332** into contact with the edges of the sheets in the conveyance direction in the state where the assist roller is located at the standby position and thus the driving of the lateral alignment (operation) ACT**7** is ended prior to ACT**8** in which the assist roller **332** is turned off by a predetermined time.

FIG. **30** is a flowchart illustrating an example of an operation sequence of the saddle-stitching and the folding. FIG. **31** is a timing chart illustrating ON and OFF states of the units associated with the operation sequence.

When the operation of ACT**10** in FIG. **28**, in which sheets are stacked and received on the stack tray **34**, is ended, the lateral alignment operation is performed again (ACT**11**). Thereafter, the lateral alignment plates **405***a* and **405***b* are slightly driven in the opening direction to the guide position for stapling (ACT**12**) (see FIG. **6**B). At the same time as starting ACT**12**, the deep-side staple motor of both staple motors is driven to perform the stitching (ACT**13**). In a predetermined time after the driving of the staple motor is started in ACT**13** (ACT**14**), the front-side staple motor is driven to complete the stitching (ACT**15**).

When the stitching using both staplers is completed, the lateral alignment motor drives the lateral alignment plates **405***a* and **405***b* in the opening direction to move from the stapling guide position to the standby position (ACT**16**). In a predetermined time after the driving of the lateral alignment motor is started in ACT**16** (ACT**17**), the stacker motor **200** drives the stacker **35** to move from the stapling position (sheet receiving position) to the folding position (ACT**18**) for performing a bundle conveying (operation).

After the bundle conveying (operation) is ended, the lateral alignment motor drives the respective lateral alignment plates **405***a* and **405***b* forwardly again to perform the lateral alignment (operation) (ACT**19**) and then drives them slightly in the opening direction to the guide position for performing the folding (operation) (ACT**20**) (see FIG. **6**B).

At the same time as starting ACT**20**, the folding motor **800** and the electromagnetic clutch **900** are turned on to start the folding (operation) (ACT**21**). Since a great torque is required for performing the folding (operation) of the folding motor **800** and thus the load applied to the electromagnetic clutch **900** is also great, the driving of the folding motor **800** may be started in a predetermined time after the electromagnetic clutch **900** is turned on.

When the folding is performed, the discharge conveyance using the folding roller pair **38** is performed, and then the fold reinforcing position sensor **720** detects the sheet bundle (ACT**22**), the stacker motor **200** and the lateral alignment motor **401** are driven to the HP (ACT**23** and ACT**24**). Meanwhile, when the folding roller pair **38** is driven in the predetermined pulses after the detection of the fold reinforcing position sensor **720** in ACT**22** and thus the leading edge of the sheet bundle reaches the fold reinforcing position (ACT**25**), the driving of the folding motor **800** is stopped and thus the sheet bundle is stopped at the fold reinforcing position (ACT**26**).

When the sheet bundle is stopped at the fold reinforcing position, the fold reinforcing motor **81** is driven to allow the fold reinforcing roller **51** to move from the HP to the opposite side (ACT**27**) and to move from the opposite side of the HP to the HP again (ACT**28**) to perform the fold reinforcing.

When a next job remains, the stacker motor **200** is driven to move the stacker **35** to the sheet receiving position (ACT**29**) in the course of performing the fold reinforcing in ACT**28**.

When the fold reinforcing is ended, the folding motor **800** is driven to start a discharge conveyance (operation) (ACT**30**). When a next job remains and a predetermined number of the pulses are counted after the driving of the folding motor is started (ACT**31**), the lateral alignment motor is driven to move the lateral alignment plates **405***a* and **405***b* to the next sheet receiving position (ACT**32**).

After the turning-off of the discharge sensor is detected (ACT**33**) by performing the discharge conveyance (operation), the folding motor is stopped (ACT**35**) in the predetermined pulses (ACT**34**).

When a next job remains, the operation of ACT**4** in FIG. **28** is performed again. When no next job remains, the operation is ended and a stop command from the image forming apparatus **10** is waited for.

The driving control of the folding mechanism in ACT**21** and ACT**30** in FIG. **30** will be described now with reference to FIG. **32**. As described above, if the driving is suddenly started at a high speed at the time of starting the conveyance again after the conveyance of the sheet bundle is once stopped, wrinkles may be generated in the sheet bundle. Accordingly, in the driving control in ACT**21** and ACT**30** in FIG. **30**, by performing the PWM control on the motor step signal of the folding motor **800** as shown in FIG. **32**, the control of enhancing the speed up to the maximum speed with the acceleration of V**2** smaller than the acceleration V**1** of the rotation of the folding motor **800** at the time of the folding control is performed at the time of starting the rotation of the discharge conveyance.

Now, the driving control of the fold reinforcing unit **50** in ACT**22** to ACT**28** in FIG. **30** will be described with reference to FIGS. **33** and **34**.

The sheet bundle is folded and inserted into the folding roller pair **38** by the folding blade **37** and the turning-on of the fold reinforcing position sensor **720** is detected (ACT**101**). When predetermined pulses pass after the detection of the fold reinforcing position sensor **720** (ACT**102**), the folding motor **800** is stopped to stop the sheet bundle at the fold reinforcing position (ACT**103**). Thereafter, the forward driving of the fold reinforcing motor **81** is started (ACT**104**), the turning-off of the fold reinforcing motor HP sensor is detected (ACT**105**), predetermined pulses pass (ACT**106**), and then the fold reinforcing motor is stopped (ACT**107**). When a predetermined time passes after the fold reinforcing motor **81** is stopped (ACT**108**), the backward driving of the fold reinforcing motor **81** is started (ACT**109**), the turning-on of the fold reinforcing motor HP sensor is detected (ACT**110**), predetermined pulses pass (ACT**111**), the fold reinforcing motor is stopped (ACT**112**), and the discharge is performed.

(7) Speed Control of Fold Reinforcing Roller Unit

As described above, the sheet bundle is not conveyed onto the sheet loading base **715** in the initial operation. Accordingly, if the elastic member **72***b* is not disposed on the bottom plate (nipping plate) **72***a* of the conveyance guide **72**, when the roller unit **60** goes away from the home position, the bottom plate **72***a* of the conveyance guide **72** collides with the sheet loading base **715** directly, thereby generating an impact sound.

A similar impact sound may be generated between the fold reinforcing roller pair **51***a* and **51***b* of the roller unit **60**. The fold reinforcing roller pair **51***a* and **51***b* applies a strong force to each other to reinforce the fold. When the speed at which the roller unit **60** goes away from the home position is great, the speed at which the fold reinforcing roller pair **51***a* and **51***b* gets close to each other is great, thereby generating an impact sound at the time of contact. The impact in normal fold reinforcing is absorbed by the sheet bundle nipped by the fold reinforcing roller pair **51***a* and **51***b*. However, in the initial operation, the impact cannot be satisfactorily absorbed because only the flexible members **73** and **74** formed of a polyethylene terephthalate (PET) film or the like are interposed therebetween.

When the fold reinforcing roller pair **51***a* and **51***b* is contacted with each other and driven in the state where the sheet bundle does not exist, a great sliding noise is also generated.

FIG. **35** is a diagram schematically illustrating the generation of the impact sound or the sliding noise when the fold reinforcing roller pair **51***a* and **51***b* is made to reciprocate from the home position in the state where the sheet bundle does not exist. As shown in FIG. **35**, the impact sound is generated just after the fold reinforcing roller pair **51***a* and **51***b* goes away from the home position. In general, the impact sound is louder than the sliding noise.

In the sheet folding apparatus **30** according to this embodiment, the speed control of the roller unit **60** is performed to suppress the impact sound or the sliding noise. In the state where the sheet bundle does not exist as in the initial operation, the speed is controlled to be lower than the normal moving speed.

Since the initial operation is performed before actually saddle-stitching or folding sheets, there is no problem even when the speed of the roller unit **60** may be set lower than the normal speed.

FIGS. **36**A and **36**B are diagrams illustrating a first example of the speed control. FIG. **36**A illustrates a speed pattern of the normal operation when the sheet bundle exists for the purpose of comparison and FIG. **36**B is a diagram illustrating the first example of the speed control according to this embodiment. The first example of the speed control is a speed control when the sheet bundle does not exist and the roller unit **60** is stopped at a position other than the home position and returns to the HP (Home Position) from the stopped state. In this case, speed **2** for returning to the HP from the stopped state is set lower than speed **1** for the normal operation. As a result, the sliding noise is reduced.

FIGS. **37**A and **37**B are diagrams illustrating a second example of the speed control. FIG. **37**A shows a speed pattern of a normal operation for the purpose of comparison.

The second example of the speed control is a speed control when the sheet bundle does not exist and the roller unit **60** is made to reciprocate from the HP. As shown in FIG. **35**, the impact sound is generated when the fold reinforcing roller pair **51***a* and **51***b* comes in contact with each other, that is, just after the movement in the traveling path is started. Accordingly, in the second example of the speed control, the moving speed in the traveling path is set to speed **3** lower than speed **2**, thereby reducing the impact sound. Since the impact sound is not generated in the return path, only the sliding noise is reduced by the use of speed **2**.

FIGS. **38**A and **38**B are diagrams illustrating a third example of the speed control. FIG. **38**A shows a speed pattern for the normal operation for the purpose of comparison. The impact sound is generated due to the contact of the fold reinforcing roller pair **51***a* and **51***b* just after it goes away from the HP, but the impact sound is not generated during the entire period of the traveling path. Accordingly, in the third example of the speed control, the moving speed is set to speed **3** which is the lowest speed only in the initial period of the traveling path and is set to speed **2** in the other period.

By this speed control, it is possible to reduce the impact sound and the sliding noise of the fold reinforcing roller pair **51***a* and **51***b* generated when the sheet bundle does not exist.

The speed of the roller unit **60** is controlled by controlling the rotation speed of the fold reinforcing motor **81**. The fold reinforcing motor **81** also serves as a power source of the vertical driving of the bottom plate (nipping plate) **72***a* of the conveyance guide **72**. Accordingly, when the above-mentioned speed control of the roller unit **60** is performed, the impact sound between the bottom plate **72***a* of the conveyance guide **72** and the sheet loading base **715** is also reduced.

The situation where the sheet bundle does not exist between the fold reinforcing roller pair **51***a* and **51***b*, may occur not only in the initial operation but also in the normal operation depending on the sheet size.

As shown in FIG. **39**A, when the fold reinforcing is performed on the sheet of the maximum size (A3 size), the fold reinforcing roller pair **51***a* and **51***b* comes in contact with each other at the edge of the sheet bundle and thus the impact sound and the sliding noise are not generated. In this case, as shown in FIG. **39**B, the speed can be set to speed **1** which is the normal speed in both the traveling path and the return path.

When the sheet size is a B4 size, as shown in FIG. **40**A, the fold reinforcing roller pair **51***a* and **51***b* comes in contact with each other at a position slightly apart from the edge of the sheet bundle. In this case, as shown in FIG. **40**B, the generation of the impact sound is prevented by setting the speed to speed **3** which is the lowest speed just after the roller unit **60** goes away from the HP. The speed can be set to speed **1** after the fold reinforcing roller pair **51***a* and **51***b* gets over the edge of the sheet bundle.

When the sheet size is further smaller like the A4 size, as shown in FIG. **41**B, the fold reinforcing roller pair **51***a* and **51***b* comes in contact with each other at a position apart from the edge of the sheet bundle and moves in the region where the sheet bundle does not exist in the contact state for a moment. In this case, the sliding noise is also generated as well as the impact sound. Accordingly, in this case, as shown in FIG. **41**B, the generation of the impact sound can be prevented by setting the speed to speed **3** which is the lowest speed just after the roller unit **60** goes away from the HP, the generation of the sliding noise can be prevented by setting the speed to speed **2** until the fold reinforcing roller pair **51***a* and **51***b* gets over the edge of the sheet bundle, and the speed can be set to speed **1** after the fold reinforcing roller pair gets over the edge of the sheet bundle.

As described above, by employing the sheet folding apparatus according to this embodiment, the image forming apparatus using the sheet folding apparatus, and the sheet folding method, it is possible to excellently reinforce the fold while reducing the impact sound and the sliding noise.

The invention is not directly limited to the respective embodiments, and can be embodied by modifying the components within the range not departing from the gist. Besides, various embodiments of the invention of can be formed by suitable combinations of plural components disclosed in the respective embodiments. For example, some components may be deleted from all components disclosed in the embodiment. Further, components of different embodiments may be suitably combined.

What is claimed is:

1. A sheet folding apparatus comprising:

a saddle-stitching unit configured to stitch a center of a sheet bundle;

a folding unit configured to fold the sheet bundle at the center to form a fold;

a loading base onto which the sheet bundle conveyed from the folding unit is loaded;

a movable lever, which is provided on the loading base, configured to detect the loading of the sheet bundle;

a nipping plate configured to be pressed to and separated from the loading base and to nip the sheet bundle loaded onto the loading base, the nipping plate having a surface which faces the loading base and a notch formed at the center thereof for avoiding interference with the movable lever, the surface being provided with an elastic member that is divided by the notch; and

first and second rollers that move along a direction of the fold while nipping and pressing the fold of the sheet bundle nipped by the nipping plate to reinforce the fold.

2. The apparatus according to claim **1**, wherein the elastic member is a plate-like elastomer and the plate-like elastomer is bonded to the surface, which faces the loading base, of the nipping plate.

3. The apparatus according to claim **2**, wherein the elastomer is a cushion member.

4. The apparatus according to claim **2**, wherein the elastomer is a rubber member.

5. The apparatus according to claim **1**, wherein a surface, which faces the nipping plate, of the loading base is provided with a second elastic member which is directed to the elastic member and does not protrude from the surface of the loading base, and wherein the frictional coefficient of the second elastic member is lower than the frictional coefficient of the elastic member.

6. The apparatus according to claim **1**, further comprising a driving section that allows the first and second rollers to move along the direction of the fold from a standby position which is apart from the edge of the sheet bundle, that separates the nipping plate from the loading base when the first and second rollers are located at the standby position, and that presses the nipping plate to the loading base when the first and second rollers move along the direction of the fold from the standby position.

7. An image forming apparatus comprising:

a reading section reading an original document and generating image data;

an image forming section printing the image data on a sheet;

a saddle-stitching unit configured to stitch a center of a sheet bundle;

a folding unit configured to fold the sheet bundle at the center to form a fold;

a loading base onto which the sheet bundle conveyed from the folding unit is loaded;

a movable lever, which is provided on the loading base, configured to detect the loading of the sheet bundle;

a nipping plate configured to be pressed to and separated from the loading base and to nip the sheet bundle loaded onto the loading base, the nipping plate having a surface which faces the loading base and a notch formed at the center thereof for avoiding interference with the movable lever, the surface being provided with an elastic member that is divided by the notch; and

first and second rollers that move along a direction of the fold while nipping and pressing the fold of the sheet bundle nipped by the nipping plate to reinforce the fold.

8. The apparatus according to claim **7**, wherein the elastic member is a plate-like elastomer and the plate-like elastomer is bonded to the surface, which faces the loading base, of the nipping plate.

9. The apparatus according to claim **8**, wherein the elastomer is a cushion member.

10. The apparatus according to claim **8**, wherein the elastomer is a rubber member.

11. The apparatus according to claim **7**, further comprising a driving section that allows the first and second rollers to move along the direction of the fold from a standby position which is apart from the edge of the sheet bundle, that separates the nipping plate from the loading base when the first and second rollers are located at the standby position, and that presses the nipping plate to the loading base when the first and second rollers move along the direction of the fold from the standby position.

12. A sheet folding method comprising:

stitching a center of a sheet bundle;

folding the sheet bundle at the center to form a fold;

loading the folded sheet bundle onto a loading base;

pressing a nipping plate, a surface of which facing the loading base is provided with an elastic member, against the loading base and nipping the sheet bundle loaded onto the loading base, the nipping plate being pressed directly against the loading base in an initial operation of performing an operation check and the nipping plate being pressed against the loading base via the sheet bundle interposed therebetween when reinforcing the fold; and

nipping and pressing the fold of the sheet bundle nipped by the nipping plate by the use of first and second rollers and allowing the first and second rollers to move along a direction of the fold to reinforce the fold.

13. The method according to claim **12**, wherein the elastic member is a plate-like elastomer and the plate-like elastomer is bonded to the surface, which faces the loading base, of the nipping plate.

14. The method according to claim **13**, wherein the elastomer is a cushion member.

15. The method according to claim **13**, wherein the elastomer is a rubber member.

16. The method according to claim **12**, wherein the loading base is provided with a movable lever for detecting the loading of the sheet bundle, wherein a notch avoiding interference with the movable lever is formed at the center of the nipping plate, and wherein the elastic member is divided by the notch.

17. The method according to claim **12**, further comprising:

allowing the first and second rollers to move along the direction of the fold from a standby position which is apart from the edge of the sheet bundle; and

separating the nipping plate from the loading base when the first and second rollers are located at the standby position and pressing the nipping plate to the loading base when the first and second roller move along the direction of the fold from the standby position.

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